# THE WASTE OF SPACE RECORDS: NATIVE SUN

BY

DAGGER BLACKER

## CHAPTER ONE

‘In Orbit’ did have a better ring to it than ‘Homeless.’ The Colonies had thought of everything, when it came to branding. The adellite circled us three times to blast the holographic billboard across the windshield: *Orbiting Insurance: For when the great outdoors isn’t enough! Sliding Scale: 180-250 Dr/Octaver*.

“Sliding scale my ass,” I waved my arm to swipe through, but this only set off the dreaded audio. Leave it to the Colonies to rev up a hangover migraine I’d almost forgotten about.

Animated figures sprang into looped existence beneath the letters, now read aloud by a narrator with the syrupiest, most patronizing voice in the universe. “*Taking Advantage of a limited time offer? Lucky dog*.” He congratulated an enthused human man rushing home in some ground vehicle.

The animated man burst through the door of some Terran home to present their new shared policy to a woman with her hands clasped to her shocked face. Eyebrows raised as her dog’s ears were, seated to her side, both marvelling at the incredible deal.

My blood crystallized, every hair on my body bristling, but none so much as the thick black blades coating my four-foot tail. I clicked the power button so the raggy treadmill below me ground to a halt.

Without the whir of the belt, the cockpit was drowned in quiet. Not silence, that would be too generous a word for all the discordant beeps and clicks accompanying the few automated controls. But the comfortable quiet of a space that is usually occupied.

Even though it felt ridiculous, I chanced a glance back toward the entrance. The rectangular doorway was empty and shadow-bound.

Of course it was. What was I expecting? To find Aries Adams himself lurking behind me like some hokey horror flick villain. Then again, casual terrorism did fall within the purview of the Secretary of Space.

“These targeted ads are getting too good.” I shook my head, but my hands still trembled when I reached for my cabin-temperature bottle of Kylix Kölsch. Downing the rest of the honey-mint beer.

It was the last of a batch we’d produced seasons ago, honey so restricted now we’d been settling for drops of wax in our tea. In other words, the sweetest thing I’d taste for years.

At last, I dismissed the ad. Rather, attempted to dismiss the ad. The projection jammed halfway across the windshield, the audio chiming in again to remind me what a “*Lucky–Lucky–Lucky–L-L-L-Ucky-Ucky Dog*” I would be to scoop up such a deal. This wasn’t any reason to write up a conspiracy, just a quirk in the Kylix’s sensor system.

With one final, exaggerated swipe of my palm, the holographic ad flitted out of sight.

I sighed. Flipped the ‘inactive’ switch at the treadmill controls. The belt submerging into the floor tiles, metal plating sliding out to replace it at the helm of the ship. That was enough for now. The fuel cell indicator was already blinking red.

The rhythmic metal tap of Cadbury’s scuffed blue boots announced his arrival before he appeared in the mouth of the corridor feeding into the cluttered cabin. Soft yellow light flooding out around him as he cleared the crust from his eyes. “You should make a move on the steering wheel if you’re gonna stare at it all night.” The First Mate clutched a pot of iced, black coffee. Our favorite. He yawned, tilted the pot over his mouth, and spilling a little on his broad, wrinkle-ridden tie-dye spacesuit. A fat, brown droplet clinging to the gross, sparse hairs over his lip he’d taken great pleasure, lately, in introducing as his first mustache.

As always after waking, his Bildwin brogue was more pronounced than usual. In the mornings, he was more Keplerite than Orbitter. The same way when I sat in the pilot’s seat, I was more Xeno than Captain. Not that many wouldn’t see his hometown in his frost-encased, hip-length, black dread-locks. Grown from a fresh cut a Keplurastian holyman had administered after Cad’s Pledge of Peace. “That’s rich coming from you, *Mr. Vy-Kaleidizen*.”

Cad choked on the coffee caught in his throat. Swallowed hard, and glared at me. “That’s *not* funny!” He lowered his voice, “And not so loud, Pool will hear you.” This reaction from him had become so regular, I was beginning to think it was stress rather than his testosterone injections that were driving his hairline back.

Despite how overdue this admission would be, I cared for Cad too much to spoil it for him, so I dropped the subject. That, and I was pretty sure, if I pressed on, he’d combust of embarrassment. The ship was a rehabilitated “FR-8 Extra Room” vehicle–or FR-8 E.R. The

*Sunkissed* model, standard for hauling jobs on planets neighboring their star. We could survive an explosion on the outside, but inside–Well, at least the Kylix would get a fresh coat of paint.

Better diffuse the bomb. “For your information, I’ve been doing a lot more than tending the wheel. I got some miles in, cleared out inbox, went over the adverse-pressure logs…”

“Blah, blah, blah, Captain stuff…” Cad waved the same way I did to swipe past the ads.

“Some of us *like* Captain stuff,” I didn’t hide the bite in my tone. “And, might I remind you, you’re the *First Mate*, Cad. If anything ever happened to me, you’re designated co-pilot.”

He gave that easy, signature shrug, “That would only matter if anything happened to you.”

Despite the Colony Codes on Xeno ascension to the position, I felt we were best suited to it. Just considering the practical angle, a cosmocraft wasn’t like a human. Like a xeno, it was always *on*, gliding along the edge of functional and destructive.

Because of this, the exercise was three-fold for me.

Xenos had more energy than we knew what to do with, born with the genetic-predisposition for high-ionoctane manuevers through enemy territory.

The running sessions also wore out the ionic fuel reserves if I kept a consistent speed of twelve cometons per avin.

The third function was more practical. There was no choice but to exercise.

Space didn’t allow one to so much as laze around. In order to keep up with the constant pressure of the space-time continuem lounging across our shoulders, Grievers were required to exercise at least four aurons a wash.

Per tradition, it was the Captain's duty to enforce this schedule, but one would soon realize their mistake in skipping weight-wash when their arm bones snapped at the whisper of a wind upon landing.

Cadbury glared down at the dashboard. "We've got a radio in here, somewhere…" he mused, brushing aside hollow cans of Kylix Kölsch Classic. I didn't realize how many until they thudded into the bin bolted to the dash. "Must've been a *real* productive drain," he said.

Clang!

Clang!

A flurry of those tiny, black fruit flies we'd picked up on a drop in the Condor Quandrant tore out of the cans in a blurry buzz. Before settling onto the dashboard to let the beer in their bellies settle.

Clang!

Clang!

More flies, and more passive aggression.

"I just pray you sober up before you get on the treadmill." Cad drew out the moment before dropping the last can with a *Clang!* that made me want to smack the Kepler brogue clean out of his mouth.

Sure, Cad was the only sober member of the crew, and I didn't have any problem with that, but what I chose to do and when I chose to do it was *my business*. "My apologies, Master," I didn't repress the snarl behind each syllable. "I didn't realize Dr. Hare had signed over ownership to *you*, of all people."

"Don't call me that, Jean," Cad said it firmly, but with no modicum of anger. He fiddled with the radio embedded in the control panel, turning all three dials until the roaring static gave way to sputtery chatter. A debate, and an intense one. One that a host was failing to reign in:

The host: "*Now, you must remember your children back in Trisp may be listening, Senator–*"

Senator from Trisp: "*Then I know even they can comprehend the madness of allowing the bottling moratorium to drag on this long! Three days! The companies whose taxes we depend on can't function under this anarchy!*"

A new voice: "*Colony Cola doesn't pay taxes to Trisp, anyway! Not to anyone! Nor do you, Senator!*"

The host: "*Let's remember to keep the discussion civil and not gossip. That may fly back on Toisev with the People's Pipe brigade–*"

People's Pipe representative: "*Nothing flies back on Toisev! We ran out of fuel months ago, but there's nothing to commodify there so we're left to fend for ourselves!*"

Senator of Trisp: "*All you Generation Adams kids have it easy! When I was a kid and we wanted fuel, we mined for it ourselves!*"

People's Pipe representative: "*Then we should be allowed ownership over our own water, to pump it ourselves. And over our own homes, the land we've lived on for decades, now!"*

The host: "*Cut the mic!*"

People's Pipe representative: "*Long Live Grievus! Long Live–*"

The static washed over the words, once more, before faint music fought through.

I thanked the Great Griever Cad wasn't a news guy. The last thing any of us needed was to get tangled up in that Occupy Pluto nonsense. Grievers holding hands and singing around the ice pipe a quarter of Inner Space depended on. All while the goldsuits pressed in.

Only Colony officials and Kaleidizens had access to laser tech. The former having stolen the blueprints from the latter. And, even if the Colony guns were less accurate, powerful, and precise, they were no less deadly. Raining down from pillships stationed near every satellite, so we couldn't so much as access the internet.

That left one with only socialization to occupy the time. For this reason, a star-naught's success depended entirely on a well-adjusted crew. Good thing, then, that I wasn't an official star-naught.

The warble of deadair receded as Libby Kissel's reggae-rock vocals blared out of the radio. "Time For A Switch" eating up every iota of silence in the ship–in my brain–that the steel plating of the ship insides vibrated as if to burst. Cadbury shouted along, banging his head:

"*First they eject us to space*

*Then they expect us to rent*

*I'm getting tired of it!*

*I'm getting tired of it!*

*First they run the land dry*

*Then they hike up the price*

*In case you're wondering why*

*In case you're wondering why*

*If we're hungry, we can't rise up*

*If we're starving, we can't do shit*

*I've had about enough of the lies*

*I think it's time for a switch!*

*I think it's time for a switch!*"

As if a pair of Cad's fine wood-handle screwdrivers had been driven directly into my brain, I cried out. Though was hardly even audible over the refrain of the chorus.

When the initial shock of pain had subsided, I groaned, "Every wash with this." Though I skipped the bit where I reminded him I had the literal hearing–and wretched, long fuzzy ears–of a bat, wrenching the middle dial counterclockwise to dull the deeper bass and synth tones.

"Oh right! Sorry, mate." His sincerity kept me from harping on the matter, but only Cad could so easily forget something he'd been reminded of *every wash for the last four yushes*.

He nodded at the green phone nestled in its cradle along the chrome control panel. “Any new orders?”

“Just a small drop, a six-pack of the lavender stuff. Some farmer wants to know Ush’s secret–”

“*Pool’s secret*,” Cad corrected. “Um, the lavender batch was Pool’s idea, Captain. Ush wanted to experiment with a chocolate porter, but we lost our confection connection on Teegarden, remember?”

“Right,” I winked. “Wouldn’t want to miscredit a crewmember.”

“Aye, aye,” he blushed.

“Anyway,” I went on. “They sent directions. Code, too, for some powerful shades. They’re out in the Henrietta Halo.”

Cad winced as if the glare of the diamond disk was fresh. “No worries, Captain,” he said. “I’ll just put my eyes away in their carrying case.”

“Yeah, well, there’s no need to rush,” I said. “Printer’s busted.”

He took his toolbelt off the back of his chair. Cad’s trusty purple steel hammer hanging in its holster. “When does it need to be up and running by?”

I put on a phony Constable voice, the one we knew all too well. Robotic, detached, yet commanding. “At ease, First Mate Cadbury. It’s not due *right now*.”

Cad donned the belt, anyway. As much a part of him, by now, as my tail, or horns, or sabers. “Does it pay?”

“In food,” I said in my normal voice. Giddy shivers gliding across my shoulders.

Cad rubbed the back of his neck as he slumped into his seat at my right hand. “Dude, I just got *chills*.” Next to water, food was the most valuable currency of all. Well, human food.

Of course, working with the landridden was a double-barreled hotshot. The benefits included eating nutrisoup instead of stale oat flakes. The downsides included the constant reminder that we couldn't touch down for more than an auron before the dragoons came knocking with warrants in hand. Not a lot of xenogene Captains, it turns out. Nor Kaleidizens traveling with humans. Nor, despite our neverending collective run-ins with exes, queers.

Recognizability sort of came with the territory, though, when it came to the Kylix. Flamboyant didn't begin to describe the ship, the rusted shuddering shelling of flimsy metal panelling sloughing off of the groaning iron frame of the condemned freighter. What remained patchworked into delicate durability with welded misshappen discarded scraps and gleaming copper sheets we'd made off with from construction yards. The outside a kind of plaid of welded seams and red rust, silver, and faux-gold metal. Tagged in red graffiti with every astrogram handle imaginable: *@SuckMyCockpit, @KometVometBand, @UglyOrbittersOnly…*

The largest and most evident defacement was of the *SUNKISSED* model logo, letters raised and rusted gold. But the S, U, and N had been pried off, replaced with a bright red ASS.

Any Captain would struggle to proudly strut onto the ASSKISSED, but the unsightly error was glazed in rubbing-resistant. ASS was here to stay.

He expanded a cabinet under the proximity radar. Pulled out a tin box of dehydrated oat-flakes, and turned it upside down over his mouth. Spraying bits of grain as he gurgled another stanza, using the box as a stand-in microphone to utilize the acoustic inside. "*In case you're wondering why, in case you're wondering why*…" He extended the box to me, a peace offering. "Is it urgent? The order."

"Well…Yes and no…." I took the box. Just enough left for a bowl. The sole remaining community bowl–the rest having wandered mysteriously to the crews' sleep modules–was located on a shelf under the steering wheel.

This was what life in everorbit had reduced a Captain to: Keeper of the Bowl.

It was next to a tall black candle with a long, white, charred wick. On the front of the glass casing, a raised, painted image of a black-horned skeleton holding a set of scales in one hand, and a blazing orange star in the other grinned out at me.

The candle was glued into place, along the bottom. Just as the dingey bronze tray it melted on was. As was the smattering of pink, crusty bones scattered around it. Bird bones, expensive in open space, and worth every droken. One long one the seller had told me was from a wing. To think, creatures on Earth had wings like ships did. Flew across the skies like satellites. I wondered, not for the first time, if they also made beeping noises every few seconds.

I felt around for the green transparent lighter in one corner of the shelf–the only thing not glued down. Lit the wick just to blow out the flame, let the heady tendril of gray smoke struggle up toward the steel-plated ceiling. "Thanks for the eats," I said before shutting the shelf on the face of the Great Griever.

Cad grimaced as he passed the pot. "We'd probably get more orders if you didn't worship a pile of bones."

"We'd get more orders if we weren't *rumrunners*." I tipped the aged, pungent coffee above the bowl of oats. A steaming, fresh, black stream washing past the dried froth crusted around the rim as it sloshed over my oat-flakes. "We can't be so obvious. There's been a lot of dragoon activity in the Perseus Arm, envoys chasing out the stragglers, I guess. Cracking down

on contraband, not just beer, but books, comics, posters. We'll have to give the order a few septurs."

Cad said, "So, basically, no orders for septurs? No orders, no drokens. No drokens, no Kylix, no Kylix, no us." He coughed into the crook of his arm. Even the freshest dye job couldn't hide the purplish flakes that sprayed across his sleeve. For now, though, I averted my gaze as Cad dug around in his pockets. "Where in Yuh Zuh is my inhaler?"

Only one colony-bound company produced the Cyano Sickness treatment–something about patents–and just one cost more than what the entire ship was worth. Losing one would be a major hit to the octavely finances.

Luckily, Cad was so dependable, in habit and demeanor. I just had to feel around under the intercom to close my fingers around the little canister. Handed it to him. "Hey, if the beer and soda demand dries up, there's always the Streaker circuit," I said.

We both chuckled at that, no way we were cut out for drug transport, we were hardly cut out for rum-running. Intoxicants were a reliable source of income, if sometimes meager. Caffeine and alcohol a competitive market since the Universal Temperance Order went into effect four decades ago. But Streaker, that glittery emerald green powder, was serious business. A market people didn't appreciate competition in.

Cad read my mind when he said, "You're a fine pilot, Captain, but, on this topic, it's best to stay in our lane."

"Here, here," I seconded, pulling away. Now, before the coffee turned the cereal to mush.

The first spoonful. Grains, a hint of honey, and a heaping helping of caffeine. Down the gullet and dropping into my empty stomach like a stone. As good to my system as a volt of electricity, chasing away the chill. Just for now.

I scooped five more mouthfuls down quick, didn't want to tip the bowl so far I lost sight of the fuel dial. Tried to keep my feet kicked up over it so Cad wouldn't notice how abnormally low we were. I hadn't just been gazing out all night, I'd been monitoring the ion-loss. Just enough to sputter to a mercy-refill from our favorite Constable–and the only one in the entire Solar System who wouldn't slap telekineticuffs over our wrists the moment we were within range.

I was pushing it, had already played this game earlier in the octaver, and we'd never met twice within the same one. Constable Antiope, slipping us extra ions, and me, each time, a little extra affection. In the yush since our flirting had escalated, we hadn't worked up, yet, to easing that golden uniform off. Everything between us gradual, careful, planned– Sometimes even messaged about beforehand. With just ten or so avins to catch up before the crew grew suspicious of my absence, there was no time to be shy about how much we wanted each other, but no time to finish whatever we started, either.

The only upside was the anticipation…

"Hello…Jean…*JEAN?* How are we on fuel?" Cadbury tidied the control panel, balling wrappers and discarded coordinate notes. Tossing them into the minicinerator. The less excess load on the ship the better, there was no room for junk, but Cad had picked a hell of a time to start caring about cleanliness.

"Good," I answered. Cad couldn't know, couldn't get suspicious. We were near enough, now, though to the Undergalactic space station. The rotating metal pyramind different from the Intergalactic space station only in physical shape, name, and legality. Each drew in business, contraband, and important people, though the Undergal was home to the most important, by far.

Ush swept into the room in a whoosh of wrinkled black fabric, her lucky lab coat nearly the same shade and length as her raven hair. Her spacesuit, under the coat, was the brightest thing about her. Pale lavender, the same as mine, per standard issue for Grievers, given the cheap cost of cloth with softer colors. If purple signaled weakness to the Colonies, then Grievers wore weakness on our sleeves.

The doctor took her own position at the left-hand circuit breaker recessed into the dashboard. Fiddled with the audio override to switch the radio to a channel dedicated to rap. She uncapped the metal canister she kept in her coat pocket. Steam and the scent of spiced tea pouring out as a sped-up beat replaced Kissel's languid melodies. Ush nodding along to a fast-paced, almost aggressive, verse.

Her fingers, closed around the steel cap, were as densely tattooed as her hands, as her arms and shoulders. Ush's sleeve of ink, which had, at some point, been legible, a list of *something*–the Doctor didn't care to elaborate–now cross-hatched over in black lines that leaked down her skin to form the negative image of a crescent moon on the back of her left hand. On the other arm, by the time the ink reached her right hand, the chatter had ebbed away to the image of a star. I'd always figured it was the name of some fallen friend, or maybe her parents, given the imagery. A way to say *You are always with me*, and *To me, you will always live on*. "The view is incredible."

"Ha, ha," I spared a flat laugh. Kind of our little tradition, as there was nearly never anything to see. A black, airless expanse, frozen over and only warm where it burned too brightly for us to go. "Never gets old."

"Neither will we, if we don't refuel," Pool rubbed the crust from their six orange eyes as they lumbered into the cabin. At eight feet tall, Pool had to duck to enter every room in the ship,

including the cockpit, now. They yawned–the only Kaleidizen I knew to do so–flexing their six external gills, arranged in sets of three on either side of the Translation officer's head. Each gill composed of a scaled, golden stalk covering one side, with a sea of writhing pink filaments on the other.

They had opted for the patch-addled suit instead of the bare one. Splattered in words, all in different colored inks and handwriting. What these said, I had no idea. They were in Ruwrgr, a language spoken only by Kaleidizens, and even then only in the reaches of space where bias dared didn't go. The language so throaty and extragalactic, most humans considered it 'growling' instead of speech.

To my ears, though, the language resembled music more. It hadn't been ascribed letters until the last decades. Kaleidizens had no need for writing, they could communicate mind-to-mind, so written Ruwrgr had been created to allow humans to learn it–not that many took up this offer. Because of this, the Kaleid creation myths had been immortalized in song. One that was Septurs long, that Pool only knew snatches of, singing snippets to the crew on our calmer deliveries.

Some lyrics were stitched into their sleeves, but I couldn't tell which ones. I did recognize a few of the patches accompanying the language. Typical astropunk fare: Flaming dragoon ships, a boot stomping a tattered gold suit… The largest patch, in the center of Pool's back, was the encircled image of a locustrat lapping from a river of blood. As the sayings went, just a single pair hitching a ride on a crumb-ridden ship could result in an entire colony sweeping over a yush's harvest of crops, turning a thriving–if artificial–ecosystem, into a worn desert.

For this reason, most pest-repellent products boasted that the toxic formula inside was “LOCUSTRAT EFFECTIVE.” For this reason, too, anyone from outside the Milky Way was very familiar with the term.

Pool cleared the dried green sap from the stubby, purple thorns along their two finger-thick, arm-length whiskers. The mustache situated beneath the three thin openings at the end of their snout that Kaleidizens used as a nose. No–not a mustache. Pool had corrected me enough times, Kaleids didn’t grow facial hair. *Rhizomes*.

They waited until they thought no one was looking to smear the sap across the front of their suit, the same way–everyone knew–they disposed of their stray scales. Then looked to Cad as they stroked the long, purple, raised welt running vertically down the underside of their jaw, and throat.

The welt had began as a line, like some kind of tattoo, but, in the last septurs, had grown swollen and deep violet. Seeming, at some angles, to throb gently.

With their scaled hand, they used the audio override to change the rap station to a radio station pulsing with drums, electric guitar, and ample–almost too much–mic feedback. Their favorite punk channel.

Pool had already donned the polished metal gauntlet opposite their left arm. Hand of delicate silver framework and arm of sturdy iron rodding, the only piece of Cad’s handiwork devoid of rust. The Translation Officer stretched as they sat between Ush and me, loosing a few bright, bronze, iridescent scales in the process, the reflective flakes floating to the floor like shavings from a glorious, polished statue. “Ush, did you leave that damn blender plugged in again?”

Cad chimed in, addressing the doctor, “I told you last time, the Liquifier 2200 is frying our battery.”

“Not to mention,” Pool huffed, “I’m getting tired of that *grelching* rattling noise in the tank. We’re running low so often, lately, I can hardly get any sleep–”

“Kaleidizens don’t need sleep, anyway,” Ush didn’t address anyone but the facts. She held her tea in one hand as she strode to the visojector. She had a bookmarked icon that made the pale green holoscreen morph into a race. The Equinid Derby. “Besides, I’ve been using the blender cup as a mold-observation study for months.”

“The tank rattles whether we’re low on fuel or not,” Sweat rolled down my face, into my mouth. Soured on my tiger’s tongue. Mmm, the taste of my own bullshit. “It must be a rock stuck in the recessed hinges, but I’m afraid to reach inside. It’s so hot, my skin would peel clean off.”

Both Pool, Cad, and I watched as one of the robust, four-legged, panting beasts lapped the others. Sweeping past with a trot, a bark, then a triumphant whinnie as the announcer called it. The voice tinny over the intercom: “*Stellar Fellow steals another mid-season race! After that loss back on Gliese everyone wondered if another streak would emerge, I’m beginning to think–”*

“YES!” Ush echoed the announcer, snapping the race off as the winning equinid accepted a decorative flower shawl. Flowers, a symbol of great honor in the Colonies.

Pool tsked, shook their head. “That’s a nasty sport, Ush.”

“Oh, they like to run,” Ush waved a hand, taking their seat again. “They’re *bred* to.”

“It’s just interesting to see how Terrex uses its precious limited land,” the Translations Officer said. “As for the tank, since I don’t want you *mammals* to lose your precious *skin*, I’ll

take a look inside. Finally grease the drum, *and* remove that acursed pebble. What would you humans do without me?"

"Get captured by Kaleidizens," I supplied. Partly because it was true, but partly to steer conversation away from the depleting fuel. The Translations Officer had talked our way out of being turned in for the collective nine millon drok reward countless times the last five yushes.

Pool drummed their nine long, elegant fingers along the dashboard. In time with that faint whirring rattle. "There it goes, now. Bang, bang, bang…"

"That's definitely the word of the wash," Ush grumbled up from her cup of tea.

Pool's three nostrils flared. "How many aurons a drain do you spend in that lab, Ush? You reek of booze and sweat."

Usher shrugged, tea steam streaming around her mouth even as she drank. "Someone's gotta cook up ideas for the new barley season," she said. "And, *this I must emphasize as a certified professional*: Doctors *don't* sweat."

A metal scritching noise announced the arrival of Tendon before he appeared. Clicking his beak, black bristles shivering in anticipation along that arm-length body as the crowcat scampered into the cockpit. Long, his hind paws and forepaws so far apart that his body between them seemed to undulate like smoke. The only thing stubby about him was his tail, the end still pale white, dozens of tendrils writhing at the end like living, bending bone.

The result of the Doctor's latest experiment. Removing the long, feathery end every few septurs to study the regeneration process and study the detached side.

Ush dropped a steel biscuit. The little crowcat devoured it in two tiny, bone-crushing bites. Tendon mewled, nudging at Ush's pocket. "MORE!" he squawked. "I MORE! ME MORE!"

He'd been vocalizing a lot more, lately. Ush's careful training regimented in order to develop a complete patient's dialogue. "I'm not a doctor if I don't get feedback on pain," Ush had said once. "That would make me a pervert."

It was said crowcat's had more than parroting skills, had intelligence exceeding that of any Earth dog or dolphin, yet the little parasite had never managed to utter anything that wasn't food related.

"No more," Ush said firmly. She reached into her labcoat, pulled out a small green ball. "Play?"

Tendon lingered a moment, cocking his head at the Doctor as if considering this, before slinking off to hide in the recesses of the ship til its next meal was due.

Ush shook her head, pocketing the ball with a chuckle. "I'd love to be surprised one of these washes." She didn't look at Tendon as she said it, though. She looked to me. Ush tapped the blinking fuel indicator, spinning in her seat to face me head-on. "Let me guess, we've got no choice but to dock on the Undergal."

"It's that or the Intergal," I said. Another running joke amongst the crew. We were expressly banned from the Intergalactic Space Station, so attempting to dock and refuel there would result in our immediate arrest. Even the Undergal wasn't without its security detail. In a sweeping deal with the United Colonies of Terrex, every unhuman establishment in the galaxy–or what was left of them once the star-naughts swept through–required an Earth-born representative. Exodus Envoys, to ensure that humanity was treated fairly by their many-gifted neighbors, and keep careful watch for criminal activity. What "criminal" meant, exactly, was, of course, up to humans to decide.

Our steady rumrunning gig had gone unnoticed until the Hydrotower incident two yushes ago. Siphoning water through a series of metal straws taped end-to-end works better as a drawing on a napkin than a heist. The resulting chase, careening through two entire quadrants of Inner Space until we'd lost the five dragoons tailing us, had cost us the ultraluminum plating Cadbury had installed fresh off our largest purchase to date. No one died, though, and, more importantly, no one got arrested. This, we'd decided, then, was worth toasting to.

Of course, this act of defiance had injected life into the five-yush crusade for my capture. My crimes laid out plainly on the holographic billboards flashing across the galaxy, along with an old picture of me, before my horns had grown in, and my hair had grown out: One count of DESERTION OF A COLONY-APPOINTED POSITION, two counts of THEFT OF COLONY PROPERTY. One for the Kylix, the other for my DNA.

The past two yushes, we'd gained the upper hand in the fuel department. Relying less on lazy patrol-dragoons to land frequently–conserving ions–and more on the Envoy posted on the Undergalactic. Constable Antiope Adams, Aries' middle daughter and my latest girlfriend

I knew the crew would balk at my repeated meet-ups with her, and outright DENY her requests for contact that I redirected from the crew in-message log to my own. Five in a row. Urgent. "It'll be a quick stop, in-and-out."

"And back in," Ush said, "And back out. Sable, seriously, we live within thirteen square cometons of each other. We *all* know about your little under-the-table Undergal smoochfests."

Pool nudged her, snickering. "What do you mean, Ush? Everyone comes back from the bathroom breathless, with their suit on backwards."

Cad gave the slightest frown at Ush and Pool's physical contact. Okay, so it wasn't exactly a secret I was getting more than the tank serviced on the Undergal, but Cad's long-time

crush on our resident translator was also a well-known fact. The infatuation so constant it was like a fixture of the cosmocraft. The black, metal steering wheel. The silver-framed window that was supposed to be a circle, but was more of an oval due to ill-cut glass. And Nelson Cadbury's silent, throbbing love for Pool.

Though Dr. Usher Lugomir's affections were reserved exclusively for intense surgical sessions, Pool Vy-Kaleidizen *was* indeed her closest friend aboard the Kylix. They'd known each other longer, travelling for two yushes aboard a corporate drill-ship before catching Cad and I attempting to steal their fuel with the extension arm of a vacuum.

Since then, Ush had taken to checking in for the daily Captain's catch-up before slinking off into her laboratory, which doubled as the infirmary, and Pool had done everything in their power to avoid one-on-one conversations with the First Mate.

*LOCUSTRAT FOR LIFE*

*YOU JUST HATE ME CUZ I FUCKED YOUR WIFE*

*LOCUSRAT FOR LIFE*

*YOU JUST HATE ME CUZ I FUCK ALL NIGHT*

*TWO, THREE, FOUR!*

I clapped my hands over my ears. "Great Griever, Pool, turn it down!" I reached the audio dial before they could, twisting it to half-level. While I was at it, though, I decided I'd had enough of entertaining everyone else's choice of genre.

It took some careful manipulation to find station three-thousand-point-six, but when I did, I could hardly believe what I was hearing. This station was dedicated to electronic music, but the deejays dabbled in disco, funk, and-my personal favorite–hyperpop.

Like electronic pop, but hopped up on streaker. The audio version of a shock to the chest to revive a dying person. Which felt like an appropriate comparison, because this particular track by this particular artist was the same that had been playing when I'd met *her*.

Now, there was something the whole crew could agree on–music taste and tidyness disagreements be damned. Yes, the only romance-centric opinion that Cad, Ush, and Pool shared was that Antiope was a shitty choice of girlfriend.

Not that I blamed them. Our first yush together had been smeared in that grimy judgement the Earthborne specialized in producing like a snail does slime. Judgement on Ant's part, and over everything–the state of the ship, our barebones medicine supply, our spiritual beliefs, my openness regarding my occasional intimacy with Unhumans–but apprehension, too, and this from both of us.

Xenos and humans didn't mingle platonically, not to mention romantically. Crossing that line, committing xenomy, was an act analogous to high treason in Colony courts. So neither made a move. None of us knowing how to extinguish the persistent flame between us, but also not how to feed it. The tentative friendship we shared didn't develop. Not then. But tapered off as each of us went back to what we did best: Her, ticketing off-route orbiters like me out in Inner Space to fulfill the quotas set by her boss, the Colonies. Me, evading Constables like her as we slung six-packs of Kylix Kölsch to citizens on the fringes of Inner Space.

After, there were my drains in the pilot's seat, refreshing my inbox. What it was exactly, it had taken me septurs to work out. Sure, she was a filthy loyalist, and Aries' daughter, but her

upbringing had gotten to her in as many ways as it hadn't. Ant was a woman in the middle, unwilling to make an arrest, but just as unwilling to quit her job. Me, or the Colonies. Her home, or the unknown. This was something I'd weighed, yushes ago, before abandoning my own post. More than anyone, probably, I understood the draw of stability, the comfort of following orders.

The steady, deep, electronic drumline intertwined with the whine of a synthesizer. The music drilling through my ears, down my chest, and into a part of me that only throbbed when Ant was on my mind, or in my arms.

It'd taken her three octavers to make a decision. Just long enough for the crew's hatred to bake into every mention of her onboard. Despite the rough start, I never had managed to stop waiting for that call. Was there to answer, and more.

"Oh my Eldeniv! Do all six of my eyes deceive me?" Pool thrust their gleaming steel finger out at my hand. Resting on the sidestick embedded in the control panel. The red button on the far side depressed beneathe my thumb. "Autopilot! They're daydreaming!"

I released the button, physically shaking my head to clear it. "Okay," I admitted. "You caught me, sorry. It's not like we're flying through a minefield…" The Colonies had set up a smattering of floating death zones at the edge of the galaxy: Kaleidizen traps.

"I'll have to track down my stethoscope," said Ush, patting her pockets in a show of mock panic. "Only a heart read can confirm but, Captain, I'm afraid you've got it bad."

Cad gave a snort of a laugh. "Struck down by lovesickness," he bemoaned. "I was wondering what that was." The First Mate nodded at my boots.

I looked down. While our suits were liquid, tear, and fire-proof, our boots could stain as easily as the Kylix. A big splash of caramel-colored vomit screamed out amidst the black rubber. "Ha, ha, ha," I tried to remember if I'd thrown up in the chuteRoom, as well. This was a worry

for later, *much* later. “Enough about me. Pool, it’s been a while since we touched down. Cad’s been telling me how much he misses the way you look on a dancefloor.” Kaleidizens were so graceful in movement, they’d turned it into a sort of secondary language. Showing off on the dancefloor was practically the planetary past-time.

Cad swivelled in his chair to protest, but Pool had perked up. More than perked up, actually. Grinning as the violet welt on their throat erupted into an ultraviolet fan, tinged with gold and glittering like a starfield.

The Translations Officer stuffed the apparatus back into their throat, and not gently. Keeping their silver hand clutched to it. “That’s never happened to me before.”

Nelson’s brow furrowed. “Are you running a fever or something? Maybe Ush can have a look at you.”

Pool shook their head, “I feel fine,” they said. “I think I could just use a leg-stretch.” They swivelled in their own seat to address me. “Sable, would you be joining us before or after the bi-octavely make-out sesh?”

“Before,” I gripped the steering wheel. Now, this was what I made for. Shoving the reclining bar with my legs til I was supine in my chair. The central dashboard above me, the left panel splayed out in front of Pool and Ush. The right panel sprawling before Cadbury and an empty chair. Hundreds of controls in the form of toggle levers, rotary switches, thumbwheels, monitors, lights, and push buttons looming the way I liked them to. The universe before me, so all I had to do to weave sense from chaos was reach out.

I did, wrenching the thrusters dial to ‘subsonic.’ A pilot knew when to go full throttle, but a Captain knew when to reign it in. Gently, I pulled the steering wheel downward. The Kylix’s

nose plunged through a tunnel of turbulence, giving the entire cosmocraft a jolt before evening out. “I won’t have any energy after.”

The harsh sterility of space was stained only by the presence of the Undergalactic Space Station. The pyramidal structure rotating where it was fixed in space. A flickering sphere of artificial gravity the only thing keeping the residents in their makeshift spacesuits from floating off, where they lounged on the docking strips.

Purple light from the nearest star–thousands of miles away–cast violet hues across the metal surface of the pyramid. I used the light to guide Kylix in for a landing. Cadbury deploying the rickety wheels descending from the underside of the craft while I steered us across a strip aisled with other shabby ships. Rousing the crews splayed across the wings of their cosmocrafts, clutching an assortment of steaming thermoses–bubbling coffee, iced ale, spiced tea…

The Captains lounging in the cockpits of their crafts clicked the locking mechanisms as we trundled past. A cacophony of passive-aggressive chirping as the locks slid shut, and the cosmocrafts beeped. Lights flashing too brightly, so I worried how I looked in it. I didn’t–couldn’t–let the crew see me wince.

Xeno pilots were one thing, but for a xeno to call themself Captain was another, an insult to every human behind the wheel, or so they would have me believe. That’s right, even to outsiders a xeno was an outsider. Even in Open Space, given the opportunity and enough liquor, Grievers would go out of their way to teach me my place. But a Captain–even an unlicensed one–was rarely without their crew.

Still, I resisted the urge to tell Cad to sit up straight in his seat. For Ush to smooth their labcoat. For Pool to–*Be human*, the thought was too heinous to acknowledge. So we rolled on.

Regulars leaned along the steel parking corridor as the timed, ship-sensor snapped the metal doors closed behind the Kylix to keep the oxygen in. Captain Krisfeld of the Cosmocraft Paradise spared a wink, raising their can of last season's Cucumber Kylix Kolsch. If my genetic composition stood in the way of making connections, then beer more than made up for that. The octilavian ancients had figured out as much, I reminded myself. A Captain's job was to be paranoid, but this was hardly reasonable aboard the Undergalactic.

The entire pyramidal structure was under the Hot Cauldron Command. The way the rule went, once two individuals drank molten iron from the same cauldron, they were family. Bound, from there on, within the Undergal or not, to protect each other from the harsh winds of Open Space.

The human equivalent, which was said to date back just as far back–if not farther–than the HCC, had a band of orbitters share water from the same pot. In this way, the same minerals would enter their blood, and there was no way to poison the pot if everyone had to share it.

Ion-harvesters Jem, Nolox, and Irk waved up from the smattering of faces. Their cramped drill-ship spray-painted with the words *Driller? I Hardly Know Her* parked and lowered.

A purple-scaled Kaleidizen waved forged seasonal passes to Burning Brahe that were so near-identical, even the artist wouldn't be able to tell them apart from the real thing.

Clustered around torn-open bags of green dust, backs to the walls of the hangar, were the tweakers. There was no better word for them, even though I hated myself for thinking of them as such. Humans, mostly, skin pocked and pale. Bone-thin arms trembling, outstretched, as they held metal spoons with streaker in it over small flames licking out of clenched lighters. The most gruesome sight was the ones who were injecting, just then.

Rusted needled dipping into the liquified streaker, drawing it into syringes. Cad had explained the way it works. It was thought that one could avoid Cyano if they didn't snort the stuff, so streaker tweakers had taken to fast-tracking the process. One woman had a large rubber band tied just under her shoulder. Her sleeve rolled up to reveal a bulging vein, that she punctured with a needle.

A man next to her completed his injection, his eyes practically glowing green as they rolled backwards. His hands flopped to his side, arms convulsing so violently he forgot to remove the syringe. Instead, it pierced deeper into his flesh. Red blood oozing out around the site.

It was a harsh but not unusual site. Open Space was typically scarcer, so more expensive, but the Undergalactic was a haven of good prices.

Every petty criminal within five-hundred thousand planeons flocked to the Undergal's docking halls–the 'Undergalactic Flea Market' – for the best deals, to skip the middle-man and get right to the source. That is, when they weren't hocking shady valuables from the trunks of their own ships. Premium superionic crystals, rusted treasures eroded only by time, medical devices I only knew by sight and not by name, hallucinogenic fruit I'd never tried and never intended to, inter-alien porn I'd lost aurons looking at too closely.

Probably, more than anything, the porn.

Most named planets, moons, even stars in the case of those that had cooled enough for colonization had explicit Xenomy Codes, courtesy of the United Colonies Department of Space. Unhumans couldn't vote in human-conducted elections, land on human-colonized planets without a permit from the Department of Space, or engage in "physical congress" with humans. Not in public, or private. It was the only rule that wasn't just punishable by banishment to the

CorrectionBelt, but also Perversion Branding on the back of each hand, and on the nape of the neck, declaring the brandee of low-standing and worthy of ridicule.

The Undergal, however, was established by a crew of Octilavians–winged, eight-tentacled beings with a long planetary tradition of peaceful cultural exchange and durable, extravagant architecture. Only one of which remained on the structure to oversee the workings of the intergalactic rest stop. Trilif sparing us a curt wave of the wing from his post on the balcony through the opening across the corridor overlooking the rusted underclub floor, where anyone, regardless of planet-of-origin, could swap spit, venom, or sweat, for all anyone cared. Though there was only one person in the massive, metal lodge I'd want to swap anything with.

Familiar faces flickered past the oval windows as I pulled the ship in to park. A slim man in a worn, grayed Griever suit with downy, brown curls and purple stripes streaking across his face–burns from a lab accident yushes earlier–grinned down at the Kylix.

Chemist Wirro Key of the Cosmocraft Crapshoot doused the windshield with runny, orange sludge. At once, the sludge gathered in the stained edges of the window, encasing the dried soap scum from dozens of prior washes before eating away at it. Bactericlean, Key's personal concoction, and a major boon for his crew's finances. "How do you ever see past all that gunk?"

"With my superior, xenogene senses," I snarked, emerging from the rusted, groaning hatch on the ceiling of the Kylix after Cad. I took my goggles off and waved the lenses at Wirro. "With my glasses, Key, duh."

"Superior, my ass," Nelson sneered. "You should've seen them this morning. 'Turn that music down, or I'll call in the dragoons!'"

Key guffawed in that echoey way of his, laughter peeling out of his gangly body like the ringing of a great bell. I was almost getting offended, was going to interject about Nelson's impressions not being so accurate until tears sprang to Wirro's eyes. His laughter stripping away to scant, choked sobs.

Right. The dragoons hadn't yet closed in on the Crapshoot crew, but private security had taken up the cause. Something about a plastic badge gives people something to prove, and this went doubly for failed xenogenes. Whether it was low test scores or lacking piloting skills in the simulator, the Colonies didn't put up with mediocrity. It was rare, but disgraced xenos weren't unheard of. Hell, I was one. But even I was above a job at Moon Mart.

To keep the value of nutriSoup high on the market, the Colonies were guarded about what venues supplied it. It wasn't something you'd catch someone bargaining for on the Undergal, and it wasn't something you could crack open an autoPod soaring off to its destination for, either. Dry goods–cereal, oat flakes, grainbars, rice, crackers–were one thing. But the hearty, nutritional soup exported from Earth itself was another entirely. Expensive, going for forty drokens per hand-sized packet versus the value bulk price of dry goods.

Only Moon Mart, a Colony-based chain of grocery-pharmacy shops, was authorized to sell them. Each equipped with an unarmed private security guard. Though that hardly mattered when the guard was a xeno.

Federale Brown had been the Crapshoot's resident handyman. He wasn't exactly a specialized mechanic, like Cad. Brown had little training, and hardly any expertise, really. Well, that was, expertise outside of the Undergal's boarding rooms. Fed was no pilot, no chef, no doctor, and no-questions-asked. Resources seemed to materialize around him, when he needed it.

Tools, fuel, toothpaste, food… And that was enough for Wirro to plead the case for his stay aboard, despite Captain Tiku's reluctance.

From what I could tell, the stay had been hectic. Fed was known to leave stray tufts of curls in the chuteRoom. To play video games during operational hours. To pinch a droken or two whenever someone left a coin lying around on the dashboard.

A couple of drokens hadn't been enough for the nutriSoup.

When haggling hadn't worked, Fed had made for the exit with a packet shoved into his suit pocket. Like all orbitters, his suit was a muted lavender. Within moments of encountering the guard, it had been turned a vibrant red.

"I didn't mean…" Cad trailed off. "Wirro, I'm sorry. I'm *so* sorry. I shouldn't have said anything."

Wirro drew in a series of labored breaths, as if he was trying to ease something out of his lungs. Something that had gone down the wrong pipe. "It's not your fault," he managed. "Any mention of those Colony dogs makes me think of him." He examined his suit, a fine layer of dust and cereal crumbs dotted it. "I still find his hair, sometimes."

No one said anything as he produced a napkin from his pocket. Opened it to reveal a small collection of strands, amounting to a tuft. Then folded it again, and put it back into his suit.

"I should get going, Captain's warming the engine up, now." Wirro jerked his thumb behind him, to his crew settlling into the cockpit of the ruby red Crapshoot.

Captain Tiku gave a nod. I nodded back, just once. We'd never exactly been close, it was Key who had the connections. Who didn't mind rubbing shoulders with crustier company.

The chemist was a half-lapsed medic who had dropped out of certification school to devote his time to producing medicine under the table. Distributing it was an entirely different

manner, where the Kylix came in. It was surprising what one could move with relative ease if they slapped a BEER label on it: Vitamins, insulin, CyanAway, hormones…

These partnered ventures were more lucrative than the usual drop, but intentionally infrequent. I respected Wirro enough to risk my own capture, but there was no deed so noble I would risk my crew.

That would make one hell of an encylowikia entry: First Xeno Captain Compromises Human Crew as Casualities in Contraband-Peddling Conspiracy.

"Leaving already?" Cad frowned. "It's been a while since the last drop."

"It's been a while since one of my labmates could order supplies without Aries' golden hounds showing up to sniff around." The gold-suited dragoons went through rushed training, usually given a leg-up because of their family name, so their investigative skills were reliably subpar. Unfortunately, their weapons were reliably functional. "I was just restocking a client's Estrogen, but that's the last for septurs. As for T, it's a controlled substance in the Colonies. It's always been more difficult to secure, but there's some kind of supply-chain issue, something to do with–"

"The Stragglers," I said. The real name of the latest species on the Colonies' warpath was unclear, smothered in rumor and derision. Repression of information, an act I'd witnessed firsthand from them. Under order, my siblings so eager to shred election records from certain planets they employed their teeth rather than the groaning machines.

The purpose this time around was similar, too: Obscure these peoples' place in the universe to begin with. If they never existed, then they were never brutally wiped out.

"Must be sanctions," Ush said. "Starving them out."

"And us, along with them," said Wirro. He reached into his satchel, and pulled out a full bottle of Bactericlean. "Locustrats aren't like bacteria, you know." He handed the bottle to me with a firm nod. "They won't evolve fast enough to survive, if the Colonies keep it up with the overfarming and pesticides."

It certainly didn't take a degree in chemistry to know he wasn't talking about rats.

"I guess luck is the only reason we've lasted so long," I said. *If Ant's name is luck, that is*. A weird kind of guilt gripped me. If my dating life hadn't decided to rise from the dead a yush and a half ago, we might not even be able to afford our stale oats anymore. Just the proximity to privilege was enough to keep us afloat. All while people with real skills that the galaxy needed struggled to keep the lights on. "Is there, you know…" I didn't want to embarrass Wirro, but maybe he lacked the pride that plagued most Captains. "Any way we can help out, just til things start turning around?"

"*Sure*," said Ush. "What would you like from our vault of riches first: The bread that's so moldy we welded over the rearwing pantry, or our fifty-count ration of individual oat flakes?"

"Humans lack such perspective," Pool shook their head. "Hunger in the short-term is nothing compared to long-term starvation–"

"You flatter me, guys," Wirro put up his hands, "really! But we're not starving, not yet."

"But the orders–" said Pool.

"Have slowed down, yes. But I'm not just a chemist, I'm a researcher," Wirro winked. "There's always something someone wants, sure, and sometimes I can't make it. But I *can* improve on what's already there."

From his tone, I gathered his real meaning. He already had another thriving hustle. Why he couldn't talk about it, I wasn't sure, but as long as the Crapshoot chugged on, I didn't bother to question.

"As for the supply-chain issue, it'll work itself out." Cad threw an arm around Wirro, squeezing the chemist around the shoulders. "Just keep me in mind when it does, would you?"

"I will," said Wirro, giving a light squeeze back. "You, and everyone. It's all I ever do." Key nodded at me, extending an arm for me to clasp up the elbow, a gesture that allowed me to sense his heart beating. "Stay dangerous, Captain."

These were Grievelish parting words I'd never grown comfortable hearing. In fact, I resented them. Why would anyone want to remain in the line of fire? Why wish peril on someone you cared for? "Uh, you too, Key."

We waved the Crapshoot crew off as they rolled out of the corridor. Striding together to the other end, where the fluorescent lights gave way to sparse, multicolored rays jetting out over the dancefloor, aisled by two long bars of black marble. Rusted stools with still-fine black velvet seat cushions. If one were to drunkenly lurch up the black, metal stairs climbing the industrial inside to the floor above, they could test the doors to the closet-sized boarding rooms.

If a door was locked, there was sure to be someone getting paid *very* well on the other end of it. If a door was unlocked, the boarder would be the one doing the paying.

The floor above that, slightly larger rooms with tables, stocked with paper and pens. Meeting rooms. The floor above that was reserved for permanent residents. Trilif and his Kaleidizen partner Wave Vyjyn-Kaleidizen.

A series of vents and seals lined the ceiling, to keep the oxygen flowing, and keep it inside, even as ships entered through the docking way. More Octil innovation, human venting

was still in its primitive stages and Kaleidizens never vented oxygen, even when hosting the rare governmental meeting with Colony officials.

The first thing one encountered at the end of the bar was the water station, and we did, too. A stack of cups, all glass, neatly stacked beside the steaming, black cauldron. The black, metal ladle melted to the lip of the bowl. The boiling iron red and half-depleted. No less hot.

Next to it, a black pot with two metal handles sat. As the Captain, I was embarrassed to be the only one who gasped when we all leaned over with cups to see that. For the first time in the half decade since I'd been visiting the Undergal, the water had run out.

Pool was right behind me with the realizations, though. Struggling with the melted ladle a moment to pour boiling liquid metal directly into their jaws. They exhaled steam as they burped, eyes snapping up to the dancefloor and widening as if they were witnessing a natural disaster. "Oh my Eagre…"

There was an usual amount of humans, tonight. Not just humans…No, Ush mentioned it first, sneering: "*Terrans*." The bougie Earth-born tourists, those who'd paid their way to secure a spot on the big blue ball generations ago. You could always tell them from the usual space-farer.

We looked different, sure–they were fair-skinned, usually had gray, blue, green, or hazel eyes–but there were other ways to tell. One sign was the watch, Terrans were insecure about being away from their prized pig of a planet, so they constantly needed to root themselves with numbers. Ten o'five. Eight thirty. Two fifty-seven. Day, night. Am, Pm. East Coast, Pacific. And don't get me started on 'Central.'

The last few yushes, Terrans had taken to wearing frankensuits. At first, blue had been their color, the same–allegedly–as that Earthen sky. But after travelling, a trend had taken off. Borrowing colors from grounded Colony-folk. Some with random strips and squares of bright

pink or green, still earthy colors. Grass and flowers. Others with entirely replaced sleeves or pantlegs. As if they'd hacked the clothes off of a Griever themself, and sewn it onto themself.

These particular terrans differentiated themselves from other touring groups by sporting what, at first, appeared to be blue scarves. Before they started wriggling.

One pale man produced a spray vial to unleash upon the animal's head. It was some kind of off-world creature, I knew enough about Earth that nearly no creatures sprouted blue hair. With a long snout like a rodent, but a long body like a snake, as well. The snivelling beast wiggled fiercely while the human blasted it in the face with red liquid that smelled of pepper.

Pool's six eyes glistened, each going so wide I thought their face might split from the grief of the sight. The entire situation was such a naked travesty, I didn't see how anyone could go on about drinking and dancing.

These Terrans were *demanding* more than anything else, slamming their fists on the fine black marble bar in ways I'd never witnessed. Hordes of women and men shouting themselves raw for attention that the two Grievers serving didn't dispense.

Shit, even when they *did* take an order, some Terrans threw the drinks into their faces. Smashed the glasses, demanded refunds even though they hadn't paid yet. It seemed *particular* also described this group.

A straw-haired one gripped both my horns and yanked my head down for a photo, her brunette friend squealing at her audacity as the camera in her hand flashed. No, now I had found a descriptor to settle on: Entitled.

Pool pushed the photographer while I got my bearings, their eyes blazing, now, with a hatred so hot it could bore holes through any ships' hull.

The Terran stumbled backward, spilling her drink down her friend's tacky spacesuit. The little square photo the camera had belched flew out of her hand.

Ush caught it in mid-air, ripped it down the middle. "Didn't your sorry ilk ever teach you to ask before you touch?"

For a second, the photographer brandished her empty wine glass, as if expecting one of us to start pissing replenishments. Before turning with her friend to slump off to the bar without a word.

Terrans rarely put up a proper fight. It was either tricks or retreat when it came to them, most of them having nothing to prove given the safety net they had back on Earth. The match was already won before we met. The Grievers didn't go peacefully into the stars, they didn't call us that for nothing. We were losers before our own births.

This didn't stop those who didn't gawk or make forked fingers under their lips to mimic my sabers from shrinking away when I was only just in sight. Not even near them, yet. I'd never felt grateful, exactly, for my fangs, but never ashamed, either. Had never wanted to hide them. Until now.

Earth-borne eyes slid from my sabers to my chest, my groin. More than a few straining their eyes to try to make out exactly what I was in that all-important Adamist way. This had always been the deal for me with Colony-raised humans from all thirteen planets. The speculation, the hardly-hushed remarks about the size, length, or depth of whatever was in my suit.

See, the most important thing to the Colonies was expansion. Aries was the first human conceived and born in space, thus proving this could be done, but the act wasn't mythologized until he'd eased his way into politics in the twenty-one twenties. The Secretary setting off a

volley of high-tech Kaleidizen attacks that lashed the already-dwindling Griever population into half once more. Aries leveraging the catastrophic event to stoke the flames of a roaring new Colony religion, the first that humans established in space: Adamism.

Hence the outright criminalization of most forms of birth control in Inner Space. If humans were going to recuperate after the Skirmishes, as Adamists insisted, dominating space by multiplying was our universe-given right and duty. Which didn't result in an increase in support for Grievers so much as a campaign of propaganda about the roles one was to play because of how their flesh formed certain organs. The past birth boon the result of a swathe of disinformation, promising support where none came, same as the last fifty. Not a good time for accidental cub-making, and not a good time at all for anyone not willing to play their part. Embrace their role, one or the other. Giver, receiver. Injector, incubator. Man, woman.

Cad seemed to read my mind, "Forget about those dirt-gulpers."

"Yeah," Ush said, voice soaking with sarcasm, "Isn't this our favorite song?"

Music was a major source of contention in the underclub. The sounds of bodily functions like breathing and heartbeats and writhing tentacles was considered pop music by Octilavians, and literally no one else. Sometimes it was kind of catchy, sometimes easy to ignore, but, towash, serenaded by the faint flutter of blinking eyes, the playlist was just pleasantly calm. An opinion that wasn't shared by the Octils twining tentacles in elaborate dancemoves.

Pool was the only non-Octil I'd ever seen engage with body-music. Not that I expected them to, now, after everything with the tourists. But that was just it. Kaleidizens didn't dance for pleasure, not only that. But in fury.

They joined an Octil in a mesmerizing sight, leg-length tentacles splaying out to radiate from Pool–scales glinting–like rays from the sun. Pool's movements as fluid as swirling clouds,

and as flexible, too. One moment, wide arcs of their glittering arms that required so much space the Octil was several feet away. The next, subtler steps that guided the shimmer of light across their shoulders down to their ankles, and back up again. These were executed skin-to-skin with the Octil.

Like a firework going off in the middle of the floor, and pushing back waves of humans clapping hands to their eyes to ward off the dangerous reflections. The incisive, laser-precision movements. It was almost a melee, so much so that Cad turned his back on the sight for fear they'd collide, where the three of us remained at the fringes of the floor.

Our choice of the shadefruit-sharing crowd–kicked back against the metal-plated walls as they bonded over the juicy black pulp–rather than idling at the bar. We'd respect the limited seating, but our crew shared an ancient agreement about never shelling out drokens for that watered-down, overpriced Undergal excuse for liquor.

Trilif had an impressive knack for utilizing metal, but his brewing would need a lot more work. The Octilavian drink of choice flowing like a delicacy from the volcanic planets sheering off meteors at the edge of the galaxy. Lava Shots, something Pool *did* slide a decadroken across the counter for. Panting and the octilavian's tentacle lubricant giving their scales a shine that seemed to draw an onslaught of head-turns.

They rejoined us, throwing the oozing transparent glass containing the molten orange liquid into their mouth along with its contents. This was an Octil custom many Kaleidizens had adopted, as well. Eating the cup before it melted so quickly a single drop escaped between your fingers. Their scales glowed bright red a moment, before dimming to their usual copper hue. "Glass is gooier than usual…"

"I hear that means *Nerhrunicien hominiter klaspa*." Like a glittering shadow, a Kaleidizen I didn't recognize shoved out of the shifting crowd. Drawing their forearm across their mouth to wipe away the clinging shadefuit juice.

Pool's six gills flexed alternating, as if drawing in some scent the rest of us weren't privy to. A nasty one, from the way they wrinkled their spiked brow. "You know, there are better ways to bond than over bigotry, *puriniter*."

The strange Kaleidizen reached out to stroke Pool's metal forearm, smirked when Pool jerked back and growled. Green venom oozing, now, around the Translation Officers sharp, layered fangs. "Then what about over what we've lost…" They hiked up their blacksuit pantleg to reveal a silver metal peg leading into their boot. "What *they* took from us."

"You don't know anything about me," Pool said.

"I know a pretty *poqegel* like you has no business rubbing scales with Octils–" They sized us up, their own gills flexing. "Not Octils, not these reeking *bazovs*." They gestured wildly to me. "And not the sabor-toothed genefreak. You oughta make yourself useful to the Hive and take a *wenerib* instead of wasting time rolling in the tar with a bunch of monkies."

Pool staggered backward at this, falling against the wall as if the Kaleidizen had socked them square in the throat.

Ush tended to them, whipping out a cool rag they kept in their labcoat at all times in case of Moon Flu symptoms–characterized by chills and persistent fever. She dabbed Pool's forehead as I took the stranger by the shoulders.

"What are you–Get your hands off of me you–you–" I bared my finger-length sabers as they kicked in my grasp. Humans and xenos were like bugs to Kaleidizens, with fractions upon fractions of the strength. But a fury I hadn't known since my mauling lessons swelled within my

chest, the kind of anger that waves aside physical size. That chews through the idea, and spits it out in the bigger person's face.

"Jean," Cad's warm hand closed over my shoulder. "They're not worth it." I turned to look at the First Mate, to disagree, but the thorny wallflowers hugging the metal plating were beginning to cluster around us. Stumbling forward with wide eyes. Harming a Kaleidizen was risky, in violation of a smattering of treaties I could argue didn't mention Xenos, just humans, but didn't.

I releashed the Kaleidizen. "Fine," I said.

Cad drew the hammer from his toolbelt by the long, purple, metal handle. He held it gleaming and steady just in front of the twitching six eyes of the Kaleid. "Consider this your warning. Unless you want to chase lava with steel, I suggest you move along."

Pool groaned, "Not now," as the ultraviolet fan leapt out of their throat.

The strange Kaleidizen snorted, looking past Cad and me to the Translations Officer. Huddled to the wall next to Usher. "If a human really tickles your griqel, then *you're* the one who's not worth it." They slunk off into the knot of bodies, music, and emotion.

Ush started to touch the fan protruding from Pool's throat, before thinking better of it. "Um, are you okay?"

Pool shook their head. "I should've expected this. My kind has developed a skewed sense of time since we lost our home sun. My *hatchinprast* was septurs ago. It makes other kaleids feel…how should I say it?"

"Aggressive," Cad supplied.

"Territorial," Pool countered. "It's in our instincts. Not their fault, but they are at fault for their ignorance."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

The blue-green spikes along one side of Pool's forearms, the back of their neck, their brow, stood on end, long and more pointed than I'd ever seen. Now that I thought of it–and that Pool wasn't wearing their fourth favorite pair of graviplatform shoes–the Kaleidizen had gained a few extra inches in the height and limb-length department. "Well, the good news is, we're all the same age, again," said Pool.

"What do you mean 'It's in your instincts'?" Ush asked.

"That's the bad news," said Pool. "I'm in heat. Now that my, uh…." They motioned to the purple, gold-flecked fan attached to their throat. "Dewlap has descended, every jynkaleidizen for planetons is on their way to hassle me for an exchange of our *griqelskin*–uh, genetic material."

"IN HEAT?" Cad said too fast and too loud, purple tones creeping into his mahogany complexion as he lowered his voice. Scrambled to cover up his fervor. "I just mean, isn't that kind of a primal word?"

"It's a primal feeling, too," Pool explained as they gently guided their dewlap back into its hidden sleeve. "For Kaleidizens, our rut is kind of a big deal. It's the only way the vyjyn of my kind is hatched, they're the most revered of the *caleodur*–Um, kind of like subsets of ourselves. Not genders, not quite, but where we fit in when it comes to mating season. Only vyjyn can lay eggs yush-round with either kind of Kaleid."

"Ah," said Nelson, nodding solemnly. "Your population…"

Pool nodded. "Yes, that's why it's so important more vyjyn are hatched. The usual clutch consists of four eggs with three parents. Vykaleids typically take two jynkaleid mates to roost with until they're laid, then adult vyjyn traditionally raise the hatchlings to adolescence, pass on

ancestral *memathoris*. Since most of our nests were back home, and most of the vyjyn were with the nests, nearly all of them were wiped out along with the Andromeda. This only happens every twenty-five yushes, so we're in the clear for a while when it passes."

"Is there any way to turn it off?" said Cad, sweat beading on his brow. "I mean, you don't want a bunch of persistent jackasses trailing you, right?"

Pool kissed Nelson's forehead, grinning. "I don't know, I'm kind of used to it."

So we put away future worries for the future.

I had no gills, but there *was* a new glow to them I felt guilty for never noticing before. Their scales shinier than ever where they thrashed in that trance-like wild dance across from me, having sprouted from finger-nail sized glittering chips to flat, gleaming, hand-length leaves–long and shaggy–more like plumage, now. Spikes sterling, sharp, and bronze as shortswords thrusting out of those gold-orange iridescent feathers. At least I wasn't the only one who hadn't remembered their birthwash. Come to think of it, I couldn't remember mine. Pool was right, being away from your home-sun will shred your sense of time.

"I'm going to see about the tank."

Ush dropped the glowsticks in her hand–though the litter was in good company, among tiny plastic bags with green powder dusting the insides. She fixed her long black hair into a comet-tail, tying it back to look at me straight-on. Compeer to compeer. "Come on, Jean, it's one thing for Cad to do it–"

"HEY!"

"--But how long are you planning to keep this 'Secret lover' act going?"

Cad ignored the barb, for now. Addressing me over the current rasp of breathing over the speakers. "How does this girlfriend of yours get such steep discounts on ions, anyway?"

Pool cut in. “Is that why you won’t tell us who it is? Because she’s an ex of yours?”

“Yes,” I admitted. It was actually kind of a relief for them to guess so accurately. This was my out from the yush-long lie. “Okay, yes, she’s an ex of mine. With connections, that’s how I get the ions for next to nothing.”

Ush tapped her watch, and a hazy blue projection of her call-log from the last septur flicked into existence. “Landred would’ve messaged me if you were on the same planet, let alone on speaking terms.” It disappeared. “Connections, eh? Like *political* connections?”

She was onto me. There was no use lying under Ush’s radar glare. “Fine! It’s…who you think it is.”

Even Cad recoiled. “I *did* think we’d had enough of Daddy’s Little Imperialist.”

“I wondered where they’d stationed her,” Pool said. “Of course they stash her nice and out of the way of any of the problems her own family caused.”

Ush pinched the bridge of her nose. “Look, Sable, I don’t want to sound harsh, but every time you run back to her, a solar system loses its star.”

Youch. “Don’t wanna sound harsh, eh?”

“Intervention time!” Pool chimed, throwing their arms around the three of us. I didn’t think it was an accident that their heavy, metal arm rested on my shoulders. “I’ve been holding off on saying this, but your devotion to that Colony-kisser is kind of, well…dragging the rest of us down.”

“What?” I shrugged out of the crew huddle. “Come on…”

“When was the last time we were more than ten planeons from the Undergal?”

The rasping lungs were replaced with a quickening pulse. In time with my own. Sweat beading on my brow, so I had to use one of my long, black-furred ears to swipe it away. “We were just in the Weiriton quadron last…yush.”

Cad clapped a hand on my shoulder. “We’re not telling you to break up with her, again–”

“*I* am!” Pool said.

“--But either bring her aboard, or cut the anchor, Captain. We’re not twenty-one, anymore. If any real Constable catches on, I’m not prepared to fight. Are *you*?”

“I concur,” Ush nodded, once, decisively. As if the diagnosis was given, and the prognosis laid out. “Her Majesty won’t be the one we have to worry about. To us, she’s Jean’s obnoxiously ignorant girlfriend. But to the Colonies, an Adams is a priceless resource. A geyser of gold.”

“Good point,” Pool’s rhizomes trembled. “Not to mention, just because someone starts off good doesn’t mean they won’t spoil. Remember that nine-week-old jar of the last brew?”

I did. One had slid behind the shelf we let the beer age on, and gone bad. Frothing and sour. Though the earlier stock had been unseasonably sweet. “Ant’s not a beer, Pool.”

“No, worse,” said Pool. “She’s an Adams.” Just the single syllable surname had taken on a kind of slur quality in Open Space. *Turncoat, traitor, Adams*.

Aries started off as a civil rights lawyer, passing orders to protect the poor. Within years, he was shipping them off with little more than a salute and the deed to land they’d die before reaching.

Pool sputtered a second before going on, their gills splaying out and the pink, wormy undersides writhing. “For fuck’s sake, her family’s the biggest benefactor of the Exodus Act.”

"*Fifth* biggest," I corrected them. Signed into law in 2125, the yush the United States Government merged with the United Nations to form the United Colonies of Terrex, the Exodus Act officiated the Eviction of ten billion people. Ninety-five percent of the entire population of Earth. The reason this was done depends on who you ask.

According to the Atmospheric Deployment Devision, it would be a cruelty to sit on piles of billions while humans went without water in the latest and most extreme bout of shortages. Therefore, the merciful thing to do, in the spirit of human exploration and grit, would be to eject anyone who couldn't afford land into space.

That spin never did satisfy most Grievers, probably due to the stories passed down from the great Dying. The real motivation was the public's inability to keep up with the price of housing as megacorporations and dynastic old-money families hoarded land, wealth, and resources. Only eleven families were left able to foot the bill, all with roots of riches stretching back to the founding of the wealthiest nations on Earth. Only five remained after a spat of inter-marriage. The Rockefeller-Windsors, the Clottvines, the Hurrenhails, the Mancels, and the Adams.

The Adams line not nearly as storied or ancient as either of the other families, but outweighing all in importance. What everyone else had in old money, reputation, and inheritance, the Adams had in impact. Because Aries Adams hadn't just earned his status as head of the Department of Space, he'd been born into it.

Before humans could even dream to settle space, there had to be proof that life was sustainable there at all. That was where Operation Eve came in.

The DNA was random, the willing contributions of paid egg and sperm donators wishing to keep their names, conscious, and debt ledgers clean. Mechanized fertilization procedures

programmed to be triggered by the intense heat the Embryionic Viability Envoy shuttle would encounter when it locked into orbit of the Luperus star burning in the sweltering, uninhabitable Running Wolf nebula. It would be nine octavers, of course, before the faces of the first spaceborne humans flashed across television screens worldwide.

Aries and Athena took their first breaths of stale shuttle air in 2101. First Athena, then her brother. Though, this was only phase one of Operation Eve. Successful fetal development, successful birth, was one thing. An acute view of the effects of space on the human body, but there was the matter of the long-term. To glean this, the shuttle was guided back to Earth so the specimens could be studied extensively. Studied, and experimented on.

The tests were cruel, but it only took a few blood drawings for lab technicians to realize the Adams twins didn't bleed. Not like earth-borne humans did, and not like any Grievers born in space did decades afterward.

The Adams Anomaly would herald the age of Amulius, the green extramatter ooze leaking out of the test subjects, in the place of blood. Just two vials sapped from Aries and Athena Adams as infants was enough to launch the first trip to the edge of the galaxy, folded in half of half of half the time it took without the amulius. Every cosmocraft in existence–on the human end, anyway–fitted with an engine that derived its power from a green-gray orb. Metal and amulius, the fist-sized ball eroding to a marble within five years time. Efficient, long-lasting power.

Since aging out of their lab habitats in their twenties, the Adams twins had been heralded as saviors of humanity. With Amulius, officials could finally justify drafting hordes of humans who couldn't afford land into space, where, they insisted, we'd find it in droves. Just at double the price, and half the workability.

Because of the fifty-year lack of strain on resources, Earth was set for decades, maybe centuries. Schools still lit, hospitals heated, museums cooled to preserve ancient human artifacts. Progress required power, and Amulius was the key to eternal strides forward. Charged with such contributions to humankind, Aries had been welcomed into the upper echelons of government as Secretary, Athena tasked with helming the Intergalactic Relations branch of the Colonies.

The first humans born in space *ruling* space. A cosmically overstated birthright.

The sticking point, as far as conversation went when one was in orbit, was that the Adams had more in common with Grievers than Terrans. Sure, they didn't exactly look like Grievers–were pale, with the most recent Adams being born on Earth–but Aries and Athena had been born in Space. Were property just as well as Xenos were, overgrown labrats forced to bear the harsh winter of the cosmos. So the Adams had been paraded as representation among the elite, and despised because of it by the Grievers. Of which, only two billion remained when the ravages of space picked off eight billion in just *one yush* of the Exodus Act being signed.

"I'll ask her, tonight," I said. "We can trust Antiope."

"And if we *can't*?" Pool grumbled.

"Get some last avin moves in," Cad said. "I hear kineticuffs can be set to 'stun,' now."

For all their squawking about peace, dragoon ships were the only vehicles in the known galaxy that utilized cloaking technology. At any given moment, a Terrex vessel could be latched onto–weighing down–yours. Hence the nickname for that sleek, angular ship model: the Parasite. Eighty arms across, it was long like a burrowing warm, a defined head, with two geometric fins cropping up out of the slightly wider body to bolster trajectory. With no cloaking, every dragoon of any edition was green. The color of success, as far as the Colonies were concerned.

The placement of the vehicle was how we had gotten away with it for so long. Me excusing myself to the bathroom on the highest floor, then ducking out of the steel-framed window to slide down the side of the pyramid. Until my feet–or ass, more likely than not–landed on the transparent side of the ship to grasp around for a handhold. The always-unlocked hatch.

It was the same deal, towash, so whatever was so urgent had nothing to do with the spaceship. That only left the Constable inside.

I looked out into the darkness for a moment. Shielding one side of my face from that intense, hot purple light. The star burning just a couple million miles away, casting violet rays over every approaching vessel for as far as the eye could see. Some clunkers, par for the course for Undergal frequenters. Three shiny, green, ovular podships. Slender, with no wings. High-tech, not usual, but not too out of the ordinary. Stuntships were common in the docking bay, flashy traders who wanted to appeal to Undergal buyers impressed by shiny things.

I closed the now-visible hatch over me–milky silver and square, unlike the brown and black rusted, round hatch of the Kylix. Opened my visor, and took in a big breath of fresh oxygen. Despite the transparent outside, the inside was very visible. It smelled the same as usual, a thick floral scent that followed Ant everywhere, and stuck to my suit for washes after visits.

It was the mess that was the first sign of trouble, maps unfurled over every surface. Sometimes circled, words outlined at random. Printed material was strange enough, it didn't take a star-naught ranking to tell this was the tell-tale signal of someone going off the grid. And way off, according to the muddy footprints on the ceiling, spare spacesuits draped over the metal rack usually reserved for a single clean towel. Giving off that unmistakable and irresistible scent of raw woman, uncloaked by perfume and even more primal for it.

Small, tin canisters with orange labels dotted the scenery of the cabin like glimpses of some rare, bright bird. The ones I had to stride past, I made extra care not to read. Some, I knew, had the updated name on the medication label, but others didn't, and I wouldn't invade her privacy, either way.

I did, however, chance to grasp the navy-colored baseball cap hanging from a metal hook next to the dashboard. A green snowflake on the center front of it, the underside of the bill shiny and bright emerald.

Buried in the midst of all of it, reclined with a book in her hands, was Antiope Adams. Her uniform was half-hanging off of her body, the unzipped, unbuttoned flaps of gold lying across Ant's module so she looked like a melting bar of precious metal. Those big black eyes fixed on me, and she snapped the book shut. "You came."

As her sense of tidiness about the ship had laxxed, so had her dedication to keeping an "optimal Envoy's" appearance. That black hair, usually buzzed to within three inches of her scalp per United Colonies standard, as thick, long, and lush as it ever was. So long, now, that it curled, something it had never been allowed to do, and that I liked *very much*. Neat, straight, snipped ends overgrown around her tiny, pale ears. Or, they seemed so tiny and cute compared to mine.

There were deep, black rings around her eyes which told me she hadn't slept in washes, and a weird sense of dread fell over me, then. Ant was right in front of me, the crew was right outside, but somebody, *somewhere*, had died.

"Of course," I sat in one of the three swivel-chairs surrounding the control panel below the sleepmodule. "I thought it was some kind of emergency." Antiope's crewmates had dispersed for their own solo Envoy appointments a yush ago. Hence our more frequent meet-ups. Before

the Undergal, they'd been stationed on a moon with a small settlement of humans and Octils, Hurklid. Safe and out of the way of real trouble, just as I was sure their parents' had requested to the higher-ups.

"It *is*," Ant zipped the front of her uniform, mending the gold suit so all her patches were visible in neat rows down the front of it. There was her Successful Peace Summit badge, she'd earned that standing around along with the thousands of other Constables while the Octilavian leaders negotiated ownership of Saturn–home to the most vital substance on their planet: Ammonia crystals.

In the end, a deal was struck. They'd allow Terrex to imprison Octils found guilty of crimes against humans, if the Five Families agreed to keep a steady flow of outward resources. This summit had been controversial among several orbiting activists, especially infamous turncoat-Constable Olivia Crest.

The largest patch was a black square serving as the background for a golden wolf to bound across. Claws reared, rampant, as the red eyes of the beast glared out at the viewer. Under the wolf, maws stretched out to suckle at its teats, two gold pups under small wisps of red flame. As if the milk were fire itself. Twins, Aries and Athena. Above the wolf, the words "VINCERE SORTEM NOSTRAM." The Colony motto. This image I'd only encountered a few times, but knew well enough was the Adams family crest. As an extension of that, the image also served as the Terrex coat of arms.

I stood to cross over to her. Gently affixed the baseball cap to her head. Traced one patch on her uniform–this one for Exemplary Discipline. Above it, there was those four flower symbols. Each beside the other, embroidered in blue amidst the gold suit. One for each of the remaining major families. A flower, they said, for Earth, the planet of abundance we had run to

ruin decades before my great-grandma's first kiss. A fifth of the planet designated to Antiope and her siblings at the Secretary's discretion. One hell of an inheritance.

My hand wandered from the patches on her chest to breasts, the other sliding down her waist. Her golden spacesuit was thin, the fabric a silken veil over her flushed skin. "*This* kind?" As if she'd expected this, Ant removed my hand. Guilt shot through me. "Sorry, too much?"

She pulled off my glove. Kissed my fingers, each one. Lips brushing the sensitive tips, then tongue tracing the length as she took the longest middle one into her mouth. "Is that good?"

Want roared up in me so powerfully I shivered. "Starshine," I breathed. "You've got no idea." Sure, we hadn't gotten around to any clothes-off action, but it wasn't for lack of desire. Our relative abstinence was due partially to the legal divides between our kinds, and partially to lack of privacy.

Sex was already something the Grievers almost considered a legend. Privacy as hard to come by as affordable oxygen. There was hardly room or enough alone time for the necessary alone-time things humans, xenos, Kaleids, Aarduliks, Octils, and every being alike had an innate need for. Reading in complete quiet, watching embarrassing content on the visojector, never mind sex.

I knew well enough, though, that myths were often based on sweet, sweaty reality. Had worked around the mismatched docking schedules and crewmate interruptions with past lovers, but Ant was a Constable. Not just that, the face of the Adams family future.

The rules were almost the same as the ones for Xenos. There was no making out with an Adams on the dancefloor. There was no way to casually bring one aboard to make your craft quake. With an Adams, there was no 'courtship,' just an 'affair.' Our low profile only lending

more credence to the label. After today, if all went well, at last, all the secrecy would go out the airlock.

Antiope gave my finger one last exquisite lick, causing the well of warmth in my groin to shudder. Satisfied with the agonized groan that dripped past my sabers, she let my slickened hand swing limply to my side. “That’s the face I was looking for: Total bliss.”

“Uh-huh…” I uttered, trying to force my brain to stop melting. Had to keep it together. “What does this have to do with your message?”

“You’re gonna wanna be really relaxed before I show you this.” She cleared her throat, reached into her pocket. Ant produced a silver disc, like a coin, but weirdly seamless. Like a gray eye into another world. A cranny, I knew from stories but not from experience. Extradimensional storage, too rich for my blood.

She let the coin-sized eye eat her arm, and drew back with her fist closed around the handle of a silver suitcase. Ant heaved it onto her desk. Carefully undid the two latches, metal buckles clicking as it burst open, and anti-light poured out.

The suitcase was padded over in thick black foam. Nestled in the center, a thick glass bottle throbbed with energy. Inside, a storming fist-sized abyss. Tiny tendrils of lightning lashing out of the swirling miniature black hole. The movements inside as hyponotic as they were chaotic.

I moved closer, heart growing cold and still in my chest. No, I had to hold it to be sure. I reached out, that warm black light growing heavy and electric as my fingers neared the bottle. With the new, fresh, wonderful heat, a faint humming growing into a song. Voices faraway, beckoning, and irresistible.

Ant snapped the suitcase shut, and it shuddered on the desk. She latched it closed. "Careful, it's volatile to a warm touch."

"What?" I said, shaking my head and feeling like any axon the next turn might snap me back to reality. "Like it's some kind of *pet* instead of an intergalactic timebomb?"

"It's not a bomb," Ant climbed up to her module, turned the pages of her book to me. "Just a tool to…a very strange end." A two-page spread of a diagram of a bottled blackhole. Labelled with each destructive property known in the universe. All according to available gear and know-how: Compression could create a vortex to eons into the future. Piercing would set off a megasonic soundwave so intense everyone within a three-galaxy radius would be vaporized instantly. Hell, simply jostling the thing could result in deadly strobing, cooking and dismembering anyone caught touching–or just near–it.

Then, of course, there was uncorking the bottle, which would result in the deaths of the nonillion space-farers just within the Milky Way as the hole consumed our galaxy, plunging everyone into a scarlet-shaded nightmare known as redshifting before something called spaghetification occurred–exactly what it sounds like, dicing us along mathmatic grids until we were just bundles of nerve-bound noodles suspended in infinitely slowed spacetime. The supermassive black hole having taken on the mass of every object, person, and planetary body before settling into a permanent position occupying our place in the universe.

I snatched it from her and snapped it shut. *The Beginner's Guide to Treason* by Olivia Crest. Illegal on all thirteen planets of the UC, and in most of inner-space.

Maroons weren't larcenists, smugglers, nor simple rumrunners–there was organization and lethality to how they struck. Someone more than a thief, someone who would do *anything* to

survive, yet didn't settle for that. A life in open defiance to the Colonies, otherwise known as a magnetar for trouble. "Sure looks like a weapon's manual to me."

"It's just essays on how to fight back when we've already lost."

"*We*?"

This topic was something we usually avoided, but if I was going to stand one cork away from vaporization, I was going to need some explanations. "*You* don't have to worry about shit, Ant. If anyone else rolled up to the Colonies with one of these, they'd be catapulted into the sun. You can just hand it over, no questions asked."

"No," Ant shot back, and firmly. "I couldn't. I know I've been ignorant in the past, Jay, but, I've been, well, reading. Getting to know more about the things I was shielded from, before we met. Starvation, poverty, slavery–"

"*No*," I shook my head. So this explained the *Guide*. It had happened before me, but it didn't sink in until I looked at the book. The Colonies banned radical material for a reason, it had a habit of, well, *radicalizing*. In just a yush, Antiope had gone from a well-meaning Terran to a wannabe-Maroon. Sure, none of us liked the Colonies, hence our operation outside of it, aboard the Kylix, but laying low was our brand. Maroons typically flaunted their affiliation by dying their suits deep red. Fiery torches for Colony-crackdowns.

As for their cause, the last decades, heavily-taxed Inner Spacers had made pushes for independence from the Colonies. Seeking to effectively eliminate the United Colonies as it existed, leaving only Earth as the true designated home of humans. Everything else to be reclaimed by the original communities run off of the conquered planets, or peacefully shared in agreement with them.

Grievus, the independent swathe of Inner Space created if the secession ever went through, would also free the Grievers from their contracts running themselves into debt in order to afford to touch solid ground. The universe's first establishment of space-born bastards.

Secession, though, of course, would never go through. The Colonies allowed a gerrymandered vote on the issue every few years, sure, but this wouldn't matter given one had to be a Colony citizen to vote. Not property, not unhuman. Human, and with an official Colony ID.

Whatever the fix, the Grievus movement had often been brought up in regards to 'the Kaleidizen Question.' Aries had dicked over an entire galaxy, but hadn't managed to get away with it. The least he and the Colonies could do was cede land for recovery of their culture to those they'd hurt. If nothing was done, something big would boil over, and soon.

Considering the existence of the black hole, things already had.

Drawing dragoon attention was bad enough, the gold suits, but maroons–anyone with a semblance of a cause that didn't line up with Terrex values–attracted the silver-suited higher-ups that didn't explain themselves, didn't shoot, didn't knock, only took Grievers. Disappearing them in the middle of the night. No trials, no rights, just warrants. Not even signed by Colony Court, but Constable Court, which answered to no one, not even Aries.

Where the silver suits took them, no one knew for sure, but there were whispers around forced farm labor in the correctionBelt. Not just that, but a "silver site." One of a handful of cloaked government locations that torture allegations leaked out of on a quarterly basis. The most well-known of which was accusations of prisoners being forced to fight each other for their freedom. This, legend said, had been the fate of the vanished popstar Libby Kissel, and at the height of her fame. Who was to say an Adams couldn't be next. "Ant, what happened to you? Don't talk like this."

"I've made up my mind, Jean," she said. "The same way you did when you defected."

A scoff escaped before I could think to hold it in. "Don't even go there, Ant. All I've ever done is steer my crew *away* from red flags like this."

"Yeah, well–" She hesitated, just barely. "Maybe that's why you never address them." The fury that surged in me wasn't the loud kind, the kind that drove one to the nearest steel wall to thrash until their fists were bloody. But a silent, incisive one that seemed to nettle Ant more than any other might. "I know this seems like opting into trouble to someone born into it, like you, but I've been listening to *CallCast*–"

"*CallCast*, are you kidding me? That show is just delirious babble," I insisted. The broadcast show was centered around conspiracies, and relied on listeners to phone in for juicy, anti-Colony gossip. Monitor cracks in the regime. "People that call into radio shows just want attention. As for that Crest woman–"

"It's the truth," she said. "True perspectives, real callers reaching out for food, water, friendship, *help*. They help each other, because the one's in power see seeking assistance as clamoring for a hand-out. Now that my eyes are open, the crimes of my father are all I can see. I mean, do you *know* what the Colonies would do with something like this?"

"Gee, I can guess." My eyes fell upon something I hadn't noticed before, so used to seeing it hung up on that hook, rather than in Ant's hands, pointed at me. A long slab of black metal with a wavy-grip handle, attached to a leather shoulder strap. Ant's hotshot, a colony-exclusive laser weapon. This technology had been stolen from the Kaleidizens, just as the blood of the Adams twins had been siphoned from their veins. All in the name of progress.

Of course I knew. The reason artificially manufacturing blackholes was illegal was because of the Expansion Skirmishes.

Aries had decided long ago that one galaxy wasn't enough for humanity. The Thirteen planetary Colonies was only ever the beginning. The goal was in the United Colonies motto: "Vincere Sortem Nostram." The textbooks translated the phrase as "To Conquer Our Destiny" but the most popular interpretation was "To Win Our Lot." Fight for, and win, control of the universe, and, eventually, beyond.

Aries and a rotating assortment of presidents were aiming for was an intergalactic human settlement. Just one, to boost morale, keep the critics sated, and prove, once and for all, we didn't need the Earth–or even the Milky Way–to make a home.

This project failed slowly, over the course of dozens of ass-beatings at the edge of the Andromeda galaxy nextdoor. Defensive lashings from the Kaleidizens tearing through vast swathes of humans before Colony forces retreated. The only way the top Colony personnel could think to infiltrate the galaxy was to blow their way through. In 2145, guiding a bottled, homegrown black hole through space to explode on the Kaleidizens' front porch.

What the humans hadn't considered–at least, as far as Aries was willing to admit–was the permanent destruction of the entire Andromeda galaxy. The black hole swallowing as many Kaleidizens as to trigger a near-extinction event. Sparing only those still residing, working, or hiding in the Milky Way.

Terrex bucked responsibility by pointing at their own casualities, and their own ignorance as to the extended effects of detonation, but the tragedy had marred Aries' reputation so thoroughly that the bomb itself had been nicknamed the Blunder.

Mistake or not, the remaining hundreds of Kaleidizens considered it a war-worthy act. To this wash, thirty yushes later, human-helmed ships were still captured in the recesses of space. The crew dispatched, and the steel bones of the ghostcraft left floating through space, a bloody

husk. Reports included details of dust-caked corpses clinging to the steel innards, gray motes and stray strands of decomposing hair sticking to the raw, exposed muscle of the deceased crews. Because, for some reason, their skin was always missing.

The remaining Kaleidizens had done their best to recuperate their culture, allying with the Octilavians on Octileight. Though their loss wasn't taken as seriously, there, since the Octils had seen nine major extinction events and crawled back from them all full-force due to certain regenerative evolutionary adaptations. Not to mention, despite being allies with the Kaleidizens, the Octilavians still needed resource-flow from Saturn, so never hesitated to buddy-up with Terrex despite decades of Kaleidizen protests and demonstrations.

"The Caniscen galaxy," I said. Aries had never let go of his dream of an intergalactic human empire. The Octils would fold like fresh laundry at the sight of a new homegrown horror. "Where did it come from?"

Antiope set the buzzing suitcase aside. "There was an attack…My old crewmate, Davenon. You know the deal. A dragoon goes into a shadowy corner to investigate strange radio signals, only their ship emerges."

I scrambled for my own radio, made sure the dial was turned to 'off.' "You think Kaleidizens made it."

"I know they did," Ant climbed onto her module, craned her neck to gaze out the window above it. Out over the station, gleaming in the violet light of the nearest star. "There were only two of them that I…met. It's hard to understand–I told you, I've been listening to *CallCast*. Lately, like clockwork, every day at nineteen-avins to the ninth auron, someone calls in just to state a bunch of numbers. I didn't get curious until they said the last coordinates Davenon was

known to transmit from. I followed them to his ship. It was ransacked, everyone dead–Angelica, though I never did care about her. Then there was Davenon."

"Ant?" I reached out toward her, but she didn't jump into my arms. There was a steely sort of look to her eyes, and a robotic tone to her voice. This wasn't my girlfriend recounting a memory. This was a Constable giving an official report. "Please don't shut me out, I want to be there for you."

"Like I was there for Dave?" Ant broke composure only to snap this. Smoothing her suit before she went on. "Angelica was just a cousin of the representative for Lochusk, but Davenon was a Griever. A kid, really."

Now, I understood. The Phoenix Initiative was enacted in 2160 by none other than Aries Adams. It wasn't really called that, but that was the common nickname for the Colony Integration Effort. That, and the Fuck-Up Initiative.

It was the second thing he was known for after the Skirmishes, and Operation Eve, and possibly the only progressive act ever carried out by the Adams administration. Mandating public transportcrafts make frequent stops to farther moons populated by browner people than those working the Colonial management positions. Granting isolated Grievers access to the better-paying places in the galaxy.

Davenon had been a Griever. More like me in complexion and circumstance than Ant. "He knew the risks, my moon," I said. "Maybe only a third of Grievers finish Basic Lessons, but you can't write off our common sense. Of that, we are in excess supply."

"It's not just that," Ant swiped at her eyes. "I don't have Terran Guilt, Jean. Well, not in a pitying kind of way, not anymore. He was only a *kid*. Just eighteen."

"Ah." Ant never talked much about her family, but I knew about it in depth the same way everyone knew of my crimes regardless of my silence on the matter: The Press.

Cosmorazzi were more dogged than dragoons. Every milestone of Antiope's home life growing up blared across visjojecters galaxy-wide. Of course, there was her beaming, charming, golden-voiced father, Aries. But she had siblings, as well. An older sister, the pride of Earth as Aries' firstborn, Artemis Adams. Then there was Ant's younger brother Apollo.

She had a protective streak carved into her from years at Apollo's crystal crib-side. One that extended especially to young men.

"I get that," I said slowly. "But I was only a pup myself when they drafted me to Starnaught Academy. It's not more tragic just because it happens to a human, Ant."

"I didn't say it was, one," she snapped. "And, two, you wouldn't know how close I was to Davenon *or* Apollo, because–"

"Because I don't have a family," I headed her off, considering it a favor. She was emotional, grieving. Saying things faster than she could think them. If I heard those words from her, the *us* we'd be building wouldn't be the *us* that emerged. "I know you miss him, Ant, but I know what it's like to form bonds. To have *brothers*."

"Of course," said Ant. "Nelson. I'm sorry–"

"Just tell me what you saw," Now I sounded like the Constable, the investigator.

Antiope swallowed hard, and went on. "It's more like what I *didn't* see," she said. "My crewmembers without their skin. Every nano-byte of data scrubbed from the computer. Every video and audio feed was down or destroyed. There were muddy orange talon-prints tracked throughout the craft. I knew the murderer must be on one of the rustmoons orbiting Cleo. It's an exoplanet–"

"I've heard of it." She was babbling, now, though, and ignored me.

"With three moons, you see. Patra, Primus, and Polythemus, that's the one I found them on. In that garage, like some kind of lab. It was rigged up so that, if Kaleidizen wasn't spoken into a microphone, a countdown would begin. Just three axons, but I would've recognized what was in the bottle anywhere. It's the only thing I could save."

"So the Kaleidizens–"

"They were *criminals*, Jean."

"*I'm* a criminal, Ant. That word is *very* relative outside of Inner Space." So much for keeping our heads down. To think, the same soft fingers that squeezed the trigger of a hotshot had sent shivers all through me. My girlfriend: The possible breathing match hovering over the largest space-borne battle yet to come.

Sure, everyone knew the Kaleidizens were behind the disappearances, but Kaleidizen leaders vehemently denied it. Despite their great population losses, their extragalactic weaponry and abilities were beyond anything humans could replicate. A gun-point treaty had been drawn up shortly after the Skirmishes, promising independence to the remaining Kaleidizens, and freedom specifically from violent human action. Killing Kaleidizens was an intergalactic crime, punishable by execution. "You're the most wanted human in the entire Milky Way."

"To *Kaleidizens*," Ant added. "Most of them are in the Caniscen, anyhow. I didn't have a choice. Would you have rather their plan went through? I'm not ready to be a noodle, Jean!"

"Okay," I said. "You're right, but…" But if the Colonies found out about the near-miss, retaliation would be swift, and deadly on both ends. Potentially exterminating either humans or Kaleidizens, or both. The Octilavians would be caught in the middle, forced to pick sides. Punished either way. Segregation would ramp up, a total crackdown on the Xenomy Codes.

Hundreds of armed dragoons with seasoned star-naughts. Set loose in Kaleidizen settlements. Not one sacking, but dozens, the most brutal yet. “This is bad.”

“Jean?” The metal plating of the floor and walls whirled across my vision in a blur of silver. The wall finding my back with a solid, dull thud that might as well have been that boulder. Black and orange, like the remnants of some mottled meteor blended into the landscape. That boulder…That invasion…The endless pleading… “Jean, what’s wrong?”

I’d only experienced one sacking, myself.

Unlike Constables, galactic diplomats, all xenogenes were born off Earth, a planet at the edge of the Colonies. The eleventh settlement, a ghost-town that had never really taken off. Wolfthrop, home only to the gestation facilities nursing litter upon litter of xenogenes. We were kept away from the general population for twenty yushes, barely raised on Wolfthrop, but thrown loose oats and lavaleech entrails every other wash. Kept in enclosures since we were infants, and already super-strong.

Indivitro technology so developed, at the point of the first xeno production in 2125, that the scientists on Wolfthrop could intricately weave a genetic tapestry of modern human and ancient homonid, digitally patching in the gaps with DNA from creatures on Earth with the most advanced senses. Each of us the orphan from some mismatched soup of athlete, animal, and neanderthal.

The way this presented was different for everyone, as the genes were. Some of my peers with the incredible lung capacity of a professional swimmer, the sprinting skills of the fastest known human paired with leopard claws to throw the distance behind you, or the rectangular pupils of a grazing animal, able to see three hundred degrees more than any human.

For me, it was thick, curled, black ram's horns. Sabered fangs from some hulking carnivorous feline that lived millenia ago. There was the strength, too. This, the whiskers, and tail, either inherited from the ancient human genes, or the feline. The ears were from neither, long, ever-perked, and roughly the size of small satellites.

There were a few major flaws in my design, though. I was near-sighted, smaller than my peers, and prone to depression. Earning me the nickname "the weeping runt" back when nicknames were the only way we could distinguish each other.

I hadn't grasped what my real name was til I was fifteen, and we were, finally, enrolled into the Star-Scout Academy, on Wolfthrop's moon Serpentarius. Well, all of us save for subject Z, who was shipped off for Observation as all Zs eventually were. For study, to help scientists improve on our design. Or, so we were told.

Our instructors were hand-picked by Dr. Julia Hare to stoke what was genetically-modified to come naturally to us: Aggression. Only one bothered to address me as anything other than 'you': XG-J 2151.

What I lacked in vision, size, and mental stability, I made up for with my reflexes. Which, it turned out, was more important than clear sight or brawn, anyway. My instructors honing, and praising, my risk-taking in the pilot simulator. Depression had its use behind the steering wheel, if I didn't care about my own safety, I could serve the Colonies without even my own mortality holding me back.

A faithful Scout of the United Colonies. What else I was created for, I didn't know until our training came to a head under a special order passed down to Dr. Hare from Aries Adams himself. Appearing in holographic form to describe the trial-under-fire, our first true field-trip off of Wolfthrop. My first time behind a real steering wheel, not one mounted under a simulation

screen. We were to wipe out the rebellious population of Kaysev, a bountiful planet inhabited by burrowing aliens with worm-like skin–smooth and banded and oozing slime. They were humanoid in all other ways, though. Something my compeers took advantage of when we landed.

Instructions were clear. They'd had their chance to surrender to Colony supervision, now every last oozer was at the mercy of my class. In order to advance to Star-Naught and be assigned to a Constable to lead us aboard one of those cloakable dragoon ships, we had to prove ourselves on Kaysev. Stomp out the enemy, yes, but, more importantly, as Aries had noted, make them wish they'd never resisted in the first place.

Kaysev started out with a population of twenty-five thousand. Each corpse counted to asure their elimination. Stacked on top of each other. Torched, mutilated. Gored through, horn-holes riddling the bleeding, slack masses. Some half-eaten. Others smeared in excrement. The worst part, by far, were the stragglers. Oozers that had been forced out of the deepest burrows, dragged out of their hiding spots and beaten to near-death. But only near. To keep them warm, I was told by more than one of my classmates.

Where that factored in, one can use their imagination. I don't have to, though. That's when I decided I wouldn't be sticking around for graduation.

Wolfthrop was a wasteland of jalopy ships. One half of the planet lit, where we were born, but the other forever-submerged in shadow. That's where the demolitions took place. Metal sorting carried out by low-level Colony employees, unarmed ones who wouldn't be eager to report that a craft slated for cube-shaped compaction had slipped through the cracks.

Aries, however, noticed immediately when I didn't report for assignment. Personally bestowing medallions upon each victor's shoulder at a ceremony known as the Hepheastus Ball. It was said he still wore my medal.

Even five yushes later, it was a risk to dock for more than an auron. In time, inevitably, some passing Envoy would be tipped off about a craft lacking a landing license. Which I'd happily apply for if the whole system wasn't set up to be as cyclical and frustrating as possible to punish orbitters.

A craft couldn't be registered for a landing license without proof of its pilot's initial credentials. One couldn't pursue pilot's credentials without participating in the Expansion Order. One couldn't participate in the Expansion Order without seeing things that made one–made me–want to abandon my post in the first place.

There was no peace for fugitives. Sure, on the surface my crime was astrovehicular theft, but they didn't pursue just any thief so thoroughly. Wasting valuable Colony time and resources, that was my real charge. Stealing away with need-to-know knowledge in my head and a patent attached to every helix of my genes. The total debt coming around to the financial tune of ninety-six trillion Colony dollars. An impossible number, but it translated to just five-hundred thousand drokens.

I'd never seen more than three thousand in one place at a time, never had more than five hundred on hand. Yet, maybe Ant was right. The bottle in the suitcase, the blackhole in the bottle, wasn't a bomb. But a breakthrough. Not a weapon, but our winnings. Unliquidated riches. Untapped potential. "I've got an idea, but you need to stay open minded."

Ant eyed me a moment, climbing down from her module to take each of my hands. "What is it?"

"You don't have plans for it, do you?" I asked. "Other than keeping it away from Aries, I mean."

Antiope blushed, turning her gaze away as she unclasped my hands. "I do," she said. "But you're not going to like it."

I would've given anything to be curious. "Try me," I said, knowing full well what Ant had in mind.

"Well," Ant shrugged, hugging herself and drumming her fingers along her upper arm. "You're thinking of the black hole as a *weapon,* when you should think of it as a the most influential tool in the galaxy. That's better than destruction, Jean. *More* than it. Just like–"

"Don't–"

"The redsuits are more than spoiled landfolk," she said, the defense at the ready. Anticipating my every move. "I know that's what you think of them, but there's nothing wrong with fighting when it's for the innocent."

"No," I agreed, "but there *is* something wrong with you putting your life on the line for something–"

"A cause!" Ant cut in.

"A cause you know *nothing* about," I said. "It's as simple as that, Ant."

"It *isn't*."

"For me it is." At once, I was aware of the Captain finality creeping into my tone. I hated it, but needed it now more than ever. Needed Ant to understand. "Before we met, I'd lead the crew into desperate, failed heist after desperate, failed heist. For ions, for an engine, for water, for *food*. The dragoons always caught on, we always *just* got away. We run for a reason, Antiope. Once you get the attention of Terrex, there's no peace."

"Then there shouldn't be any peace," Ant choked on the words, swiping at her damp, flushed cheeks. "I see what you mean, Jean, but the things I've already done to get this…We can't just destroy it."

"I don't want to destroy it," I said. "I want to sell it. Not to a human, not to a Kaleidizen. Someone neutral, with faraway reasons for wanting it. Some distant galaxy, some distant war–"

"*Jean*!" Her tone, then, was hard to parse. Judgemental? Scandalized?

"I know it gets used either way, but we might not have another chance."

"Slow down," Ant was taller than me, my curved horns coming up to her shoulder. She pulled those blue gloves off to pet my horns, now. Just lightly tracing the sharpened ends in that way that made the fur on my tail stand on end. "Another chance for what?"

I explained as much by leaning up on my toes. She met me half-way. Pressing her cool, full lips to mine. Softly, at first. Her tongue grazing my sabers. Each one hand-length and on either side of my mouth. So sharp, no matter what I did, that Ant nicked her tongue on one. I didn't know until she deepened the kiss, and I tasted her blood.

I closed my eyes to build a full flavor profile. Iron, robust and pungent. She was healthy. Of course she was, always well-fed, her father would see to that. While the rest of us in orbit starved. Aye, I couldn't help but consider how soft and smooth her hands were on me, inside my suit, versus my own. Calloused from gripping the steering wheel.

Ant tried to run her hands through my hair, but the wild mop of twists was in no way Colony-standard. We had to part to get her fingers untangled. That's when I asked her, as she drew her hand back, and I tucked away a long, stray twist. "I want you to move in with me, Ant. Aboard the Kylix, I mean."

She rolled her eyes. “Of course, short term,” she said, tucking the silver suitcase containing the Blunder inside the gray cranny in her hand. Ant donned a backpack as well. Stray spacesuit sleeves hanging out of it, pressed against the sides as the middle burst with full sacks of crystalized ions. Premium fuel. “My ship cloaks, but there’s a location bug somewhere in the walls. Anyone could home in with the right tech, and you said yourself I’m an intergalactic fugitive. It’s only a matter of time until they close in.”

“Not short term,” I said. Sweat sliding down my palms. “Long term. It’s an eyesore, sure, but a freighter ship before Cad fixed it up. There’s a lot more space than you think, it fits the four of us just fine. All with separate sleep modules, those are private, at least. If that’s what you were worried about–Or, if you think it’s too weird to commit like this to someone you’ve never been with–In that way, I mean–”

Ant’s tone was teasing, giddy, and laced with allure when she said, “It *is* sort of old-fashioned. I’m a twenty-second century woman, Jean.”

“Then let’s modernize.” We kissed again, but with a feral fervor I hadn’t allowed myself to feel with Ant yet. Or, at least, hadn’t allowed her to see. Me bearing down on her as she backed to the sterling steel-plated walls. Our hands all over each other, tearing at the zippers on the front of our suits. I needed that feeling, skin on skin, and Ant delivered, taking me by the shoulders to urge me into her chest. An area I hadn’t been permitted to explore until now.

Antiope had never mentioned what a hindrance my mammoth sabers were directly, but just kissing on the mouth posed enough of a challenge. Was new enough territory. All those sensitive organs, the ones that were shiver-skinned and swollen and so pleasurable to the touch it seemed a shame they ever go back behind clothes, seemed too risky to chance near my teeth. “Are you sure?”

"It's okay, Jean," Ant panted. "I trust you."

My mouth found her sweet, hard nipple amid her soft warm breasts. First one–watching my sabers, the tips, the glistening white edges–then the other. Antiope groaned, took ahold of my spacesuit, and practically lifted me up inches off the floor for a kiss that made the Big Bang look like a minor traffic collision.

The tight knot between my legs throbbed, aching to be unraveled. Our suits were, at last, peeled off, but only to the waist. It was no exaggeration to say that below that was forbidden territory, entire laws dedicated to upholding appropriate behavior between person and property. In an Envoy, Constables only carried out a job, xenos *were* our job. Piloting and mauling sewn into our DNA, pleated in thousands of layers over the human core.

Xenos could get with other xenos, no problem–though it was considered taboo for xenogenes from the same production yush to fool around. The genetic pool from which we spawned rotating on an annual basis so we were welped alongside just over two dozen of our relatives. As for the genetic generations preceding and following my class, even I had been with another of my kind. An Octil once or twice. All of us Unhuman in that umbrella sense. Now, though, I had never been more aware that Antiope was human.

Not just human, Terran.

Not just Terran, the Secretary's daughter.

Just then, a pang of that thing that had shaded over me on the dancefloor shot through me. As if those Terrans and their glaring eyes were with us inside the ship. Shame. Through the eyes of our invisible spectators, I watched myself: Greedy, straining for more of Antiope's tongue. Pawsy, my hands curled like claws, one closed over her waist to pull her closer to me,

the other around her breast. Everything about me too fast, too deep, too much. “Sorry,” I pulled back. “I didn’t mean to, uh–I got carried away.”

“You don’t have to apologize, Jean, I *like* it when you kiss me like that.” As we parted, the stiffened outline straining at the groin of her suit became apparent. Usually, panting and coming down from making out, I’d follow Ant’s lead and ignore the sight. Tonight, though, she cast a long glance down. “Unless *it* makes you uncomfortable–”

The emphasis on the word wasn’t lost on me. “You could never make me uncomfortable,” I said. “I want you, Ant. *All* of you. As for the, you know…*gender stuff*, everything I feel like I should have, I don’t, and that I shouldn’t have, I do. It’s always been so confusing to me, trying to make what I am fit into what they say I should be–”

“Jean?” Ant squeezed my shoulder. This wasn’t a topic we visited often. But, if we were moving in together, I figured we’d find ourselves delving more into the unspoken stuff sooner rather than later.

“What I’m trying to say is, your pleasure is important to me,” I went on, my voice growing thick with emotion. “If you want, you can trust me with your body. And I trust you. It’s just that–” Orange dust drifting across my vision, dirt glazing my eyes. Three xenogenes holding a screaming, scrabbling Oozer. His cries, howling until the dirt was so dampened with his blood that his struggles no longer kicked up dust.

“Breathe…” Ant’s voice pierced through the vision of the past. “Jean, you’re not breathing.” She clapped me on the back until, like an old engine, my lungs leapt to function.

I croaked, “It’s not you that spoiled it, it was me.” A tremble gripped my fingers. I curled my hands to fists. “I’m being too pushy, acting like an *ANIMAL!*” The word tore out of me in a nasty, barking bleat.

"Aww, Jean," Ant stroked my cheek. Cleared the tears there. "I know you don't like to talk about this stuff, but I'm not your victim, I'm your *lover*. You're not pressuring me, I'm *choosing* you." She blushed a pulsing scarlet, opening her palm to take my swishing tail into her grasp. "Everything about you." Antiope brought the black tip of my tail to her lips, and kissed it. Kissed my horns. Gently pressed her lips to my sabers. "You're not hurting me, I'd let you know if you were."

"Thank you," I said, "Thank you for…understanding." Ant was right, I didn't want to talk about this. Not this, not Wolfthrop, not what I was really made for. "There's no time for this, anyway."

"We could make time," Ant made a compelling case, fingers playing along the seam over my groin.

"I thought you majored in Urban Planning," Drool inched down my chin, and I swiped at it with the back of my hand. "Not Physics."

"Aww," Ant kissed my left saber. "You remembered my major." She ran her tongue along the length of it while she rubbed me. Applied just enough pressure for me to forget about the Blunder. For a moment, forget about what the big rush was, at all. "I want to get closer to you, Captain."

"Tonight," I said, the word electric with promise. "The crew's waiting." With that, for now, we parted.

Antiope mended her suit with a definite ZIP, thrusting her arms through the sleeves. Before I could grip my own zipper, she pinched it between her fingers. Eased it gingerly up to my chin. "Speaking of the crew,  I'm sure the Kylix fits the four of you just fine, but that's just it. The *four* of you. You all might be friends, but they *loathe* me. They'd never let me onboard."

"They're the ones who encouraged me to ask. Ant, we can't keep hanging around the Undergal. Aries'll catch on, eventually. But, we can't be apart, either," I said it as fact. "We'd be worried about each other all the time."

"Who says I worry about you?"

"Come on, Antiope, we both know you're in love with me." There was too much risk and proof on either side for us to argue the matter further. "It's time we move on, together. Buy our freedom from your father, negotiate a landing license, settle down on some moon. It doesn't matter which one, as long as we're safe, and we're together."

"Jean–"

"Maybe he could come to the wedding, even," I went on, feeling wild and reckless even as I spoke, "That's what humans do when they love each other, right? When it's supposed to be forever? Get hitched? Then, he'll *have* to accept me, it'll be official, on his terms."

"Yeah…" Ant wandered away from me in that Constable inspector way: Hands clasped at the small of the back as she marched across to her desk. Rolled up a constellation map. "That *is* what they do, when they can get marriage permits. Do you know who issues those for Space Grievers? Terraterns, Jean. Terraterns answer to judges, judges answer to terraclerics, and terraclerics answer to *my father*." She traced a palm over a recreation of the stars above Venus. "You're very romantic, but not very practical."

"That's why we need someone like you aboard," I said. "You know how the Colonies works, we don't. We're aimless. We're capable, yes. I'm an excellent pilot, Pool picks up languages as easily as moonrocks, Ush is the finest medic to ever operate on a negative budget, and Cad could fix anything with duct tape and a sensible hammer. But we've only hidden in the Colonies, you've *surveyed* them."

"Hardly," Ant protested. "I've only drawn up a few rudimentary maps of Hurclid, Marcinn, and upper east Proxtauri."

"And I've drawn up zero," I shot back. "I go by what people like you enter into the Galactic Positioning System. My crew needs more than someone who can fly the ship, we need someone who knows where the fuck we're going. You *know* Terrex as well as I know you." This, neither of us argued with. "You're what we're missing, Ant. A tracker who knows how our enemies operate. I keep us going, but you could keep us safe."

Antiope blushed, "I'm no master tracker, Jean."

"No?" I said. "After all those yushes dodging your Dad, it was *you* who found me."

Ant smirked. "I didn't 'find' you, Jean," she said. "I just saw you standing there with your hand out."

"That's what I said," I stretched my hand out, now. "You found me."

Ant clasped my palm, and, without having to talk about it, we recreated the scene, lying on our backs to stare up at the ceiling. Of course, that night, we'd had the entire galaxy laid out in front of us. Blinking and breathless and black.

Aries had been circulating my XG-ID for three yushes, at that point, along with a photo of twenty-yush-old me. Taken octavers before the Oozer invasion, before my hair had grown past three inches, and before my horns had developed their deep curves. By twenty-one seventy-three, though, my hair was a mop of black twists, and my horns were thick, full, curved, and sensitive. I'd outgrown his image of me.

There was still, however, the matter of my peers. Maybe my more matured horns would ward off the dragoons, but they also warded off everyone else. That night on Proxtauri, though,

on an island in the middle of a purple ocean of low, swirling fog called Pacific City, was the Volturnalia Festival. The yushly Parade of the Great Griever.

Every three-hundred washes or so, everyone who recognized the loss of the billions of Grievers in the first yush following the Eviction Exodus would don a black cloak and a solid mirror mask, with openings only for the eyes and mouth within the glass mould. Those attending festivals in Open Space, like us, would add a pair of black tin horns to the ensemble. Such was the case with the throngs of celebrators flooding the streets that night.

Something to do with horns representing evil Earthen animals, and embracing our birthright of bad luck. The masquerade a tradition tracing back to the original survivors of the Exodus. The dwindled crew had only managed to convey so much about their Earth-borne culture to the first generation of Grievers before the vacuum claimed them, too. What was left was fashioned into Volturnalia.

At first, I attended out of convenience. The one time a yush I could show my face on land for more than an hour, of course I took advantage. But hedonism was only half of the celebration, the other half was the Die-In.

Cad abstained from all holiwash celebrations per his Keplurastian beliefs, so he and Pool had hung back in the Kylix awaiting my call for pick-up, while Ush pedaled the latest Green Onion Variety Pack of Kylix Kolsch to a snobbish bunch I didn't care to get to know. Humans could only stomach so much onion juice in their beer, so we were more novelty than staple. Only Kaleidizens seemed to stock up on our stuff. Yet, because tensions were flaring more than ever, we rarely ran into them. This left us with only the tourists. Of which, thankfully, there was just the clamoring gaggle.

The parade was sprawling, stereos blaring discordant music at random, placed wherever, because plugs were wherever. Windows open, people leaned outside to pass down masks and sloshing cups of cool water. Masked people twisted up into leather pretzels as orgies spilled out of alleyways and into the open street where paraders simply stepped over them.

The bars were the only places anyone took off their mask, otherwise the liquor would run down the glassy surface of it and dribbling over your shirt. Though some gleefully did this, toasting the Great Griever as the drink made contact with the dirt.

At twelve aurons on the dot, the beginning of the next wash, though still completely in the dead of the evening, everyone collapsed. As if cut down by some invisible gunfire. Not at once, but a wave as people staggered backwards to find a comfortable landing spot. We would, after all, be lying there for the next auron.

I'd been caught on the outskirts of a local park. The equipment barren and the metal base of the swings and slide obscured by the sea of breathing bodies. The grass was deep blue on Proxtauri, despite the best efforts of the Terrex Agricultural Commission. Blue, tall, and pillowy when I stretched out on it. My limbs out and my back to the ground.

Per tradition, I reached out to the person who settled down next to me. A woman in a pale pink spacesuit. Not a typical color, lavender was for spacebound Grievers, black for the landridden of us. Pink, however, was usually a mourner's color. The hue drawn from a delicate dying process, one-time wear at most. Then back in the closet.

"I was a sitting target," I said. "You could've called for back-up. You could've taken your shot."

"Who says I didn't take my shot?" grinned Antiope. Years ago, she'd taken my hand. Lied with me for an hour. Watched the same sky as me. Wispy clouds wandering over the stars

to give the entire night the illusion of being watched by millions of blinking eyes. We'd asked each other one question.

Mine was simple. She wasn't in her Constable get-up, yet, but I knew well enough that Ant was no seasoned space-farer. Her gray boots were unscuffed, the stitching neat and tight, still, along the base. Barely walked in. Her skin had a glowy kind of quality, giving off the kind of shine one only emitted if they'd been in direct sunlight within the past months.

Even more, she proudly sported a baseball cap.

Dustdisc was considered the sport of champions for Grievers. A homegrown, fast-paced, risk-based sport that involved recocheting metal discs off of asteroids in the OreBelt.

Baseball was considered the dinosaur of recreation, a holdover from Earth's more boring summers. It was unspeakable to root for a team in public. This didn't quell the emergence of a nostalgic group known as the Ichabod Icicles.

The only space-based baseball team in existence, with a rotating roster of players all vying for Earth's hall of fame to no avail. Every season hosted on the pale green moon Ichabod, rotating a barely larger planet called Eerie in the Neolevy quadrant.

A green snowflake–the Icicles logo–was situated in the center of Antiope's cap. Two years ago, I pointed to it: "There was a game tonight, right?"

She'd replied, "Yeah, but the score was the same as always."

"Zero to one," I understood the typical ratio. "At least it's always a close call."

Maybe at first it was just Terran Guilt driving her to the charity, asking to see our ship just to offer to cover the cost of the most dire repair needed. But Ant stuck around. And, apparently–though in a lot of ways she'd been doing it from the start–changed. Even if the

maroon talk was a bit off-putting, it *was* nice to finally see that passion in the right place. Her ire aimed at the right people, her own.

"Antiope," I grasped the bill of her cap. Picked the hat up, and set it down on her head backwards. "Everything in space is so in-the-air and untraditional. I don't know anything about my own culture, I want to honor your roots and do things the typical way, for once."

"That's really sweet, Jay," said Ant, rising to her feet. "But, I mean…Sure, I was born on Earth, but I don't even *bleed* like an Earthling. Terran culture isn't *necessarily* mine."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to generalize–It's just that–I don't know, I suppose I've been thinking a lot about milestones, I guess–" I bit my tongue, physically, to keep myself from babbling. "I just mean that it seems like only yesterday I was crawling through a broken window and feeling around in the glove compartment for a key, and now it's five years later and three people depend on me to keep that hunk of junk chugging. In another five, I'll be *thirty*, Ant."

At this, she sighed with a labored groan. "Oof, yeah that rings a bell." She looked down at her hands, which I only noticed, now, were blotchy bright red. Her palms raw. "There are definitely some things I didn't think I'd be taking into another decade."

"Well, there are things I've been thinking–*wanting*–to." I wracked my memory for the lines, the ones I'd typed and deleted and altered over the course of septurs. "Ant, you make me feel like I'm discovering something new and thrilling and–and on the cusp of impossibility. Everything about you has this intense gravitational pull. What it is, exactly, I don't know, but it must mean something. I *want* it to mean something."

"Aw, Jean." Antiope drew a hand across her watery eyes. "Are you making this up as you go, or did you practice that line?"

"About half and half," I admitted, standing and extending my outstretched hands. "I mean what I say, but I might be quoting my notes just a bit. My *vows*." Antiope matched me, stepping closer to take my hands. As far as proposals went, there weren't many Terran traditions I was aware of other than asking on one knee. Now, though, it felt right to see Ant from the usual angle, both of us on our own feet. "Ant, if you marry me, I'll never have to see the Sun, again. You'll be my home star. You already are, I–" I paused, just for a moment. Had to be sure of this. Griever superstition claimed saying this in falsehood would doom a Captain's ship. "I orbit you."

Antiope laced our fingers, her black eyes searching the metal-plated floor for a moment before meeting mine. "What about the permit? My father will never issue it–"

"We'll bribe a Terratern to let us slip through the system when we apply," I said.

"Terraterns don't do that."

"No," I said. "*You* don't. Corruption can work in our favor, sometimes, too." A few beats, my heart thrumming in my ears, the sound so constant, like an angry hive of phosowasps. "So, what do you think?"

Antiope thought for a moment more. "Yes," she said, slow-like. "But under one condition, and it is non-negotiable."

"Of course," I said, dizzy, my head spinning. I leaned against the wall to avoid swaying. "Anything, Ant."

She grinned across from me, "I'm taking your last name." *REEEEEECH*! Antiope lost her footing as the entire Undergal rocked.

The hazard lights flooded the dragoon in blinking red light. The security system blaring down from the speakers lining the ceiling: "High-velocity impact detected! In case of danger,

please launch escape pod…High-velocity impact detected! In case of danger, please launch escape pod…"

I righted my glasses, pushing them up from where they'd slid down my nose. "What the–?" *REEEEEEECH! REEEEEEEEEECH!*

The intercom erupted into a cacophony of jumbled language. "High-velocity–DANGER! Please launch–DANGER! Impact detected, in case of–POD–POD–POD–POD–POD!"

Antiope pulled herself to her feet at the control panel. Entered a series of passwords before the security system shut off, and the hazard lights blinked back to gold. "*SHIT!*"

"Are you hurt?" I picked her up, thinking one of her ankles must be tender, but she shook her head in my arms.

"It's not me–It's…them."

Three high-velocity objects, three ships impacted with the Undergal. "Kaleidizens," I breathed. "They know."

Kaleidizens had a kind of hive mind, a neurogalactic link. For Kaleidizens, the hive was a religion, an organ, and food source all in one. "Ant, when you killed those Blunder brewers, how many eyes did they have?"

"What do you mean?" Ant slung a pack over her shoulder. Holstered her hotshot, snub-nosed, black, and gleaming where she had it leaned against the wall. "Eight, of course."

Shit. "What color were they?"

"I don't know–bright?"

"What *color*? Orange? Were they orange?"

She said, "They were more like gold."

Fuck. The shift was subtle, two extra eyes blooming on their face, those orange irises burning over to a hot, fiery gold. The mark of the link. First to that Kaleidizen's pod, then their pod, then their own, on and on until every Kaleidizen in the universe watched as Antiope slaughtered their endangered ilk. Another trigger-happy Constable, this time gone too far. "We've got to get out of here."

CHAPTER TWO

The Undergal had a new addition to the dancefloor: Suffocating humans. Three green gleaming cosmopods were lodged in the walls of the great rotating pyramid, breaking the oxygen vacuum and letting out all the precious air. The whooshing roar of it escaping just the background instrumental to the song of suffering.

Whooping gasps, heavy, wet heaving. Cries, then silence. Bodies collapsing blue and purple in the face, hands frozen where they clawed at the throats of the fallen. Thick, throbbing veins bulging in their arms and foreheads before going still.

My helmet sprang over my head before I'd had time to exhale in the underclub. Pressure-sensitive, hair-trigger collapsable domes that the crew had nicked off a shipment to the Rustdust Mars Mall. Meant to react to the lack of oxygen before we could. Even Antiope's Colony-grade equipment required manual activation. The Constable desperately slapping at the buttons along her collar as her own gasping joined in on the chorus.

*BODIES*, my mind flashed the word behind my eyes, white-hot light blotting out the mass graveyard. *BODIES AND BLOOD*. Red, oozing down the chins of gurgling people. Scarlet webbing crawling over the dimming eyes of the dead.

At once, the rushing wind was riddled with dust. The bodies before me were those of the Oozers, instead of the humans. The cries, for fuck's sake, the cries were the same.

Antiope's whooping hacks clapped on my eardrums. Her fingers growing bluer as they fumbled at the unlabelled buttons at the top of her suit.

Right. I had to to get it together. Had to keep it together for Ant, for the crew. In a rush of resolve, I forced everything else out of focus except her. Stepping over two clasped bodies to press the little black button I'd seen her press before. Her own helmet closed over her head,

though this did nothing to stop her hands from trembling. “D-d-dead,” she stammered, kneeling to cradle a gasping, blue rodent–one of the living scarves the terrans had used as an accessory. “They’re d-d-dying–”

“CAPTAIN!” Cad howled my title, both hands already anchoring Ush and Pool in place amidst the sea of limbs. The Kylix crew were some of the only humans that remained standing as Trilif emerged from his loft with Wave, his Kaleidizen partner. Wave shouted down at the Kaleidizens leaping down from the smoking, crushed ships in the wall. Something fast, the Ruwrgr words smushed together so I doubted save but a fluent speaker could parse them.

One of the Kaleidizens drew a hotshot, and blasted at Wave after taking aim. Missed, but only because they meant to. A warning that Wave didn’t heed, starting down the metal steps to the floor, but Trilif used those tentacles to stop them. Urged their partner back into their room, and shut the door. I thought that was the end of it, but Trilif emerged axons later with a long, silver hotshot. And shot the shooter’s head clean off.

The sphere exploding into a shower of glittering scales, shards of obsidian bone, and oozing gold ichor. Kaleidizen blood had been spilled.

“NO!” Pool cried at the same time that the remaining three Kaleidizens opened fire on the Octil. Trilif’s tentacles shielding the first brutal volley, but there was no blocking them when his tentacles were reduced to shreds of gray skin. Green blood splatting the stairtop as Wave trembled in the doorway.

“Don’t worry, *poqel*. You can do so much better than some greasy bugmug,” one of the jynkaleids sneered. “It’s about time everyone started to learn their place, *who* they belong with–” They gave Pool a real dirty look at this, scowling at them as those orange eyes seared a rage-filled path up all eight feet of my translator.

Cad still heaved from the sudden loss of oxygen, taking great gulps in so his helmet fogged. He drew his hammer as he urged Pool behind him, though the length of the purple metal handle trembled furiously. Despite the clear sheen of panic on his face, his voice was as easygoing as ever when he said, “If you’re here for the drinks, there’s less fatal ways to make an entrance–”

“Save your precious breath, Griever, I won’t speak with any human save the thief,” said a blue-hued kaleidizen. “Pond, keep your head on straight. We’ve got to…focus…” Their gills flexed, taking in that invisible scent. Pool’s pheromones, or the Kaleidizen equivalent. “Well, we do have time, I suppose…”

Cad swung the blunt, metal end of the purple-handled hammer through the closing distance between him and the jynkaleid. “Trust me, dude, they’re not interested!”

The jynkaleid hissed, long, slitted nostrils flaring. Triple-forked blue tongue bared and lashing like a whip, dripping that golden ichor that served as both blood, and venom. One touch could put a person to sleep for six aurons.

Pool stepped over a throng of suffucated corpses to get between Cad and the three circling jynkaleids. “What in Eagre’s name is going on here? All of this over a *mate*?”

The blue-scaled kaleidizen strode forward. “If you don’t know, then you really *are* a bystander this time.”

“Frees you up for other things, anyhow,” Pond–the blue jynkaleid’s compeer–gave a sharp whistle through their gills. “Why don’t you get to know a Kaleid for once, *poqegel*–”

“*DON’T CALL ME THAT!*” All those elongated spikes along Pool’s forearm, neck, and brow bristled. Trembling, as if aching to spear an enemy through. Pool’s scales flexed, and their

voice was so thick with rage the sound thundered around in my bones for avins afterward. Shaking loose something I'd never felt with Pool: Fear.

"It's a compliment," the blue jynkaleid waved, as if knocking away any doubt. "*Brood bringer*. You've never been so radiant, and I've never been so mesmerized–"

"Okay, lover-scales," I rolled my neck. Felt the pop, the release of tension at the base of my skull. Ramming needed prep, properly running someone through. So what if Pool was getting bigger, they weren't the only one who could get scary. "This isn't really my kind of music, but I'll still dance."

To my back, Antiope stammered, "Jean, what–What are you doing?"

"Follow Nelson, Ant."

Nelson wrung his dreadlocks. "*WHAT?*" he howled. "I can't pilot the ship!"

"You don't have to fly it, yet," I soothed. "Just start it. All those years right next to the wheel, I know you can do it, Nelson." I addressed Ant. "Cad can show you where the tank is. It's empty, so it might eat all your ions."

"It has a habit of doing that," Ush agreed, joining me at Pool's side.

"Now, both of you, get to the Kylix," I said. "Wait for me there."

Keplurastianism held non-violence as a virtue for practitioners, of which the Kepler-born First Mate was a devout practitioner. Every yush without harming another's vessel marked with the incredible growth of his hip-length dread-locks. However, despite Cad's pleading, Ush, Pool, and I had used our numbers and the fear factor of xenophobia to get the upper hand on more than a few grain transport pods.

Still, this would be our first fight amid an ocean of death. Whatever lay on the other end of this conflict, I was the Captain. If anyone got hurt, that was on me. “Well?” I jerked my head back toward the ship. “I said *wait for me, there*. That was an order.”

Nelson relented, first. “Be careful, Captain.” I found the black key in my pocket–everyone else had lost their copy–and tossed it across the dancefloor to the First Mate.

He caught it, bounding back toward the ship, but Ant remained standing for a few axons. I nodded at her, just once. Finally, she joined him.

“That’s an order I’m going to have to decline,” Pool growled through fangs dripping with venom. A thick, green drop splashed onto their iron gauntlet as they adjusted the flintlock switch in the control panel embedded in their forearm. The ratchet clicked, and their splayed metal fingers sprang into a steel fist.

“I concur,” said Usher, smirking. She drew a narrow brick of silver–one of Tendon’s treats–from her lab coat. “What an unruly crew you have.”

“Good thing I’m not a real Captain.”

The jynkaleids crashed on us in a glittering wave.

A bleat tore through me, reedy and way too loud in that sense I’d always hated, but appreciated, now. Ush’s metal brick bursting through one orange eye. The Doctor taking a volley of spikes to the arm, flesh coming away with fabric just as easily. Her suit mending in that way all of ours was set to, since we’d stolen the nanoknitter from a moon called Reeselice two yushes ago.

My horns sank into Pond’s abdomen, but his scales mended around the wound as easily as our suits did. Kaleidizens weren’t like xenogenes in that they were particularly strong, but

their biology was persistent. Long natural lifespans, quick-mending wounds, limb regeneration, the gills to breathe in open space.

The same Kaleidizens Aries had dicked over fifty-five yushes ago were still young, not to mention kicking around in Octileight. Part of the reason the embers of revenge had never simmered despite their dwindling numbers. Something I honestly respected. I mean, it's one thing to vividly hurt over an exchange of harsh words that occurred septurs ago, I could only wonder about the pain of half a century burning so hotly.

Pool took the brunt of the attacks, gliding between opponents, weaving elaborate defense moves. Block, block, bite, hiss, block. The blue-hued jynkaleid was giving them a run for their drokens, matching every move, every twirl.

"It's River, by the way," said Blue Scales, panting as Pool lunged at their jugular. "Not that you asked."

"Wasn't planning to!" A handful of blue-hued scales came off in Pool's clawed hand as they slashed at the jynkaleid's face. "Did you ever consider it isn't my life's dream to be your breeding tool?"

River shouted, "It's not like I have any choice in the matter, either. We're in heat, it's our duty to our kind. To all the forgotten species of the Andromeda galaxy–"

"We have a duty to ourselves, that's just as important."

"It will be," said River. "When we've regained our numbers. Tell me, Pool Huwelelia Xsprantonin Vy-Kaleidizen–"

All the fight drained from Pool's body. They swayed at the mention of their full title. "How do you know my name?"

River ignored them, "--How does hanging out with these *bazovs* contribute to the cause? Bolster our numbers? Make any strides toward liberation, reclaimation?"

"Who *are* you?" Pool's gills flexed, those big, orange eyes widened. Glinted with gold. "River Feneran Graftanasen Jyn-Kaleidizen?"

River beamed. "In the scales and spikes."

At once, their henchkaleids, Pond, and another one they referred to as "Drip" scuttled to the blue jynkaleids back. Orange eyes scanning us for any sign of trickery.

Pool stumbled backward for a moment, their glittering bronze hand clasped over their mouth. "What is–How could it–But what about–?" Pool threw a glance back up at the loft where Trilif was still splattered. Wave–his partner–crooning to the gray slime oozing into their palm. Right. I'd never seen it in action, had never seen anyone attack the peaceful Octils whatsoever, but Octilavians had a healing factor, too. Restructuring. Trilif would be back, though he might use a different name, and he might not be a he this time around.

"Relax," River soothed. "We're not out for any trouble, just what the human stole. See, no harm done."

"No harm done?" Pool's swaying gave way to buckling. Again, Ush caught them. Slid an arm around their shoulder. "Look around, River. You've murdered dozens of innocent oxygeners."

River sneered, "You and that perspective of yours, well isn't it about time we told *our* side of the story?"

"That's right!" Drip chimed.

River went on, "I return to my legally-rented garage to find two of my closest friends riddled with holes, our lab *ransacked*. Trickle, a mated vy-Kaleidizen and accomplished

scientist. And Stream, a lazeabout, sure, but they were *loyal*. They were my *friend*." A strangled kind of anguish rippled along the edges of River's words. For a moment, I couldn't help but see someone mourning. A Griever, not different than the rest of us.

Except that I was shacking up with the killer in question.

River's voice grew sturdier, "A valuable, volatile item has been stolen from me. And not just by a representative of those Colonies you studied under, but the daughter of the Secretary, himself. This is a matter of intense security, whoever got hurt in the process of pursuit is just collateral."

"If you *are* the River I know, then you have no business speaking like this."

"Things change," said River. A simple, almost shakingly *human* expression, and a cold one at that. "Has it even occurred to you that you're interrogating me in the Colonizer's language. *Huwyn hor shrimenska?* I've asked myself the same question, and continue to, but so must you, Pool. *Have you no shame*?"

"I'm not ashamed of my friends," Pool snapped. "Not them, and not Kemi, either."

"Then you still refuse to apologize? Just say it, Pool. That's all the other hatchmates want to hear, we all make mistakes, sometimes."

"Kemi?" Cad sounded out, slow. His voice hollow and soft from where he uttered the word in the shadow of the murmuring Kylix. A faint blush curled up into his cheeks.

"It was no mistake, River," Pool corrected them. "You know me, I've always been curious about other cultures."

Pool had always been close-mouthed about how they ended up on that drill-ship with Ush, mining for superionic crystals as Ush monitored samples of ion dust to document the effects

on artificial lungs before being cleared for usage as fuel. “Cultural differences,” had been their only answer for yushes. Now, I wondered if I should plug my ears and sing “Time for a Switch.”

Holding tight to our drokens was the thing we valued above all on the Cosmocraft Kylix, but holding tight to our secrets was the thing we valued above all in Space. “Pool–” I started.

Their scales were on edge, all throwing light, all spectacular, shimmering skin. “It’s okay, I’m done feeling like I did anything wrong.” They looked over their shoulder at the three of us. “She is–*was*–a space-faring human. You know, from one of the colonies, Luyten…We met at Uranus University.” The college Pool had mentioned, the human not so much. “I’d just started studying translation, so I thought I’d try my hand at some Latin.” Pool chuckled. “Not as common, anymore, as I was led to believe in my studies. We kept talking. She was studying painting, so we’d joke that both our degrees would be meaningless.”

Ush cackled at this, spit flying out of her mouth as she slapped her knee. “Ignore me, go on…Sorry, it’s just that I was thinking that, exactly.”

Pool scowled at Ush a moment, then continued. “Kemi and I became close friends, I even visited her home planet over the Adams Day break. Back on Luyten, that’s where we first kissed. Back at college, that’s where we first…”

Cadbury brightened at this, while River hocked and spat a green glob of venom onto a human’s corpse. “You and a *human*?” Nelson didn’t mask his hopeful tone. “A human and *you*?”

“I didn’t think it’d be a big deal,” said Pool, “everyone experiments in college.”

“Which is why only asexuals get Adams Awards for their research,” Ush noted.

Pool ignored her, “Someone must’ve reported us after one of our sleepovers.”

“Disgusting,” Drip piped up. “Weren’t you ever worried about that thing giving you geopox?”

"All off-Earth humans are vaccinated for geopox," Ush said. "It's just as deadly to us as to Octils and Kaleids."

"Kemi wasn't sick," Pool sniffed. "The Eldeniv were. What they did to her–"

"They could've just as easily done to you," River cut in, "if a Pool weren't on the council–"

"Kaleidizens are supposed to be above the bloodline nonsense," Pool protested. "Pool Urnecian Raegeriastia has never given me anything! Only taken!" Pool thrust their steel arm out toward the jyn-Kaleid.

"Yet only one half of your rotten union stands speaking," River replied. "Everyone knows there was an exception made for you, Pool. Doesn't mean it'll happen again. To run with humans is to muddy one's *sporausica*. You may not have seen the dirt they track all over the universe, but this is because the Eldeniv remember so we don't have to. Make the hard decisions so we don't have to."

"So we don't have to think, more like," Pool cried. "I was only curious, River."

"Curiosity killed the Kaleidizen."

The Kylix's engine turned over in a series of sputtering huffs. Echoing down the chamber leading up to the underclub dancefloor. The floor trembling, shaking up a blanket of dust and tracked dirt. Drip peered down the corridor. "Where are you mudpups getting off to so fast, anyway?" They nudged Pond.

Pond nodded, gills flexing. "It's on that cosmocraft, isn't it? With the Terran?"

"What are you–?" Pool stepped toward them, but I took their hand. Ush was already ahead of us, sprinting out and away from the Undergal and down the docking corridor. We tore

across the floor, our steps only little additions to the cacophony of patter, slithering, shouting, urging, and weeping as others loaded into their ships. Left their friends behind on the floor.

When Trilif reformed, there was no doubt he'd sweep them into a chute, so their bodies could streak through space as burning, distant wish-stars. The same fate as the billions of Grievers before them.

"It's…I'll explain when–" A volley of lasers ate into the stray twists at the top of my head. Pool practically pushed the rest of us inside as we came to the idle, rumbling ship. Used their body as a shield, burning, black holes rippling along their torso as the jynkaleids continued to fire. The wounds closed as quickly as they opened.

Ush heaved the hatch closed, throwing that rusted damn lever. The Kylix didn't have a lot going for it, but it *was* laser-proof. It was the heat from continuous fire that would eventually be the death of us. Already, the exterior thermostat embedded in the control panel was ebbing on three-thousand degrees fahrenheit. The limit was five before the interior thermostat began to creep toward two-hundred degrees.

"Well?" I brushed past Cad to my seat. Despite the active temp readings, no other indicator appeared live. "What the fuck, Nelson? I asked you to start the ship." I didn't have to look at him to know his expression, slumping into his seat in my periphery. At my right hand.

"I told you when I moved in, Jean, before this, I've only ever been in charge of inventory and engine maintenance." He sunk into his seat with a deep, low sigh. "I'm not like you, or Pool, or Ush. I'm not a specialist, and I don't have any training or skills or powers. I'm just some guy."

"Yeah, well," I couldn't help but roll my eyes. "I didn't exactly stick around for my pilot's license, you know? Take some initiative, Cad!" Nelson flinched at my tone, but I didn't have time to feel bad about this. Not yet.

Ant gripped the back of my chair as my hand hovered over the central pedestal: The raised platform between Cad and I–the pilot and co-pilot–that included the controls for lighting, hatch locks, and, most importantly, the engine. "Jean," she drew an arm across her sweating forehead. "It's hot."

"What about you?" I said. "Why didn't you show him?"

"I…Well, we were always given, you know…" Ant seemed to be choking on something other than the heat. "*Xenos* to pilot the ships. I only know how to operate a Jeffington Seventy."

"*Seriously*?" For some reason, this admission tasted bitter on my tongue. I shook the sweat from my coily mane, splashing it across the waterproof control panel and, most importantly, keeping it out of my eyes. "Anyone who cares to learn, *watch me now*!"

I zeroed in on the engine panel. The AUTO letters glowed red at the top of the crank dial, automated systems were down–a symptom of the Kylix being low on fuel–meaning manual start-up would be the only means. "Ush?"

The Doctor understood immediately. We were already at one-hundred twenty-five degrees. "A human could withstand two-hundred more axons," she panted. "Tops."

"Start a timer." I wrenched the dial to the LEFT label, and the left end of the uniaxeler engine coughed. At the same time, the entire structure quaked as one of those green cosmopods tried to wrestle free of the steel wall.

I found the reclining bar with my heels, and shoved downward. Ant gasped as I jerked into a lying-down position. "Sorry, this is the best way to…" My hands took control from there,

stealing all the concentration away from my brain. My fingertips playing a series of switches along the throttle quadrant assembly. LEFT burn-out protection. LEFT thrust. Now, back to the engine panel. LEFT engine.

Now, the ship gave a great groan forward. A blast echoing through the corridor. Ush reported, “Seventy axons.”

Guided by memory, I repeated the series of clicks, flips, and cranks for the RIGHT engine. The RIGHT burn-out protection. RIGHT thrust.

The reluctant hum of the engine was accompanied by the soft yellow light of the cabin flickering to life. “Now we’re cooking with ionoctane.”

“Captain?” Pool spoke with their face smushed against the glass of the oval window on the left side of the cockpit. They recoiled away from the sight, squeezing their head which seemed to visibly throb. The Translations Officer’s eyes flashed gold. “STOP! NO! IT CAN’T– THEY WOULDN’T!”

Cad’s eyes snapped up from the control panel. “Pool, what’s wrong?” He tried to rise from his chair.

“SIT DOWN!” I barked. “AND BUCKLE UP!”

Nelson didn’t protest. No one did, Ant finding the seat on the other side of him and stretching the seatbelt across her lap in time with the rest of the crew.

The Kylix rocked as one pod freed itself, creating a total vacuum inside what remained of the Undergal. Limbs loosed from bodies as easily as clothing items, which all leapt toward and out of the new openings. Washing over our windshield in a great gust of chaos and color.

I gripped the throttle lever, and threw it forward to the maximum thrust. When the lever clicked into place, I planted both hands on the black metal steering wheel, and jerked it upward.

The Cosmocraft leapt out of the docking corridor. Clean smashing a hole through the ceiling. Trilif would understand when I explained that we were being shot at. Hell, he'd understand when he saw everyone who needed oxygen was dead, anyway.

The jets caught us. I knew from experience the sequence. First, small yellow sparks. Then, orange flames. Then, great blue walls of fire. Just to get us into the atmosphere. After that, the antiox converter would eat at the ions to take us wherever was next.

"River?" Pool groaned, holding their head as we hurtled into space.

I glanced at the monitor between the minicinerator and intercom speaker. The staticy image of those Kaleid ships wrenching through the remainder of the metal pyramid–which looked more like a cube that was burst open, now.

Cad strained against his seatbelt, reached across my shoulders to plant one hand on the Translations Officer's. "Is that monster in your head, now?"

Pool gave a rattling growl. "No!" They thrashed. "LIAR!" They slammed both fists–iron and scale–into the Right Inboard Module. Gold tendrils of ichor–Kaleidizen's blood–surging just below the downy skin under their glittering coat. "I won't let them see our next move. I'm–I'm cutting our *keuleug* off."

Nelson's mouth twitched into a deep frown. He withdrew his hand. "You were *talking* to that murderer?" He wiped his sweating palm across his suit, staining the bright rainbow tie-dye.

"We'll get all our murder talk out of the way soon enough, guys," I said. The violet skies of the Undergal bleached to black. Distant yellow, orange, red, and white stars winking millions of miles away. "Right now, I need everyone to brace themselves. FALLING LEAF MANUEVER!"

"Falling what?" Cad cried.

I accelerated as all three pods raced in a line to head me off fifty cometons in front of the Kylix. They were looking for me to overshoot. “As if!” I spat at the rear-viewing monitor. Any pilot worth their weight in wheat knew to keep the enemy in front of you. And the pods didn’t even have the good sense to travel in a shortcutted arc instead of a direct line. Giving away their soon-to-be position, and hovering fixed to meet me on the same aerial plane we glided on now.

There weren’t any enforceable speeding laws in space, least of all on the fringes of the four quadrants, and there weren’t any other crafts for planetons. Traffic only collected in Inner Space, crowded shipways established only along high-density areas clustered about the colonies. Open Space, where the debris and outlaws were, that was a free for all. A pilot’s playground.

With a glee that frightened myself, I took hold of the aileron lever within the central pedestal. Rockets roaring as I shifted the controls to the right, the Kylix banked left. Hard.

The cabin jolted, everyone at once thankful I’d warned them to strap in as we caught air before slamming back into our seats.

Now, I eased the boosters, and we jerked downward by ten whole yards. A successful diagonal move, and one I repeated to the right. The left. The right. Again, and again, everyone crying out dully in the background as my heart pounded in time with some rhythm I’d forgotten.

Whatever kind of monster River was, they were a competent pilot. As we zig-zagged downward, thrusting forward at the formation of pods ahead and above us, they refused to fall into the role of pursued. Maintained their pursuant title, the three pods moving in synchornized formation to fall behind the Kylix as the top of the ship scraped shrilly against the lowest of the three pods.

Through the rear monitor, I watched as lasers rained out of a weapon’s opening in the hull of the nearest pod. Washed over the rear of the Kylix in a useless shower of sparks.

However, if River and company were catching on that their guns were no good, they might turn to explosives. This, the Kylix was immune to, on the exterior, but I didn't want to find out how the Blunder would react to the rocking cabin.

I threw the throttle forward as my crewmate's necks snapped backward. Ush, Cad, and Ant clutching the control panel.

I checked the Right Overhead Module. Sure enough, the G-Force dial had leapt into the orange half of the pressure estimator. Humans weren't meant to be shaken around in a flying metal can, their spines could snap at the wrong bank angle, and their hearts could burst at the wrong speed.

I eased the throttle backward, decelerating by just enough to let Cad, Ant, and Ush recover their breaths. "Sorry, is everyone okay?"

"That was…" Cad clung to his dread-locks as if to stabilize his spinning head.

"INCREDIBLE!" Antiope vomited as she said it, the pink-brown chunks spilling past her lips and rolling off her gold, stain-proof suit. The fruit flies stirred from the bin of cans to feast on the latest addition to the cabin floor. "We were taught 'Falling Leaf' but I never saw *anything* like that in flight class."

I swerved out of the way as the first of the three trailing pods surged past us, landing squarely into our vision and into the role of prey to our predator. The other two falling behind like the tucking tail of some great, green, gleaming creature. "Starshine," I said, fixing both hands on the metal wheel, "you've got no idea."

River at the head had gotten the hang of arcing backward to meet one's pursuant, but it was far too late for that. Now, I had had time to think, the worst thing you can hand a pilot. Or a Captain, for that matter.

"Cad?" I asked. "When was the last time you took out the trash?"

The First Mate fidgeted with the light dimmer. "Um, recently? Two washes ago? Three washes ago? Three…" Cad sighed. "Three septurs ago, Captain."

I bit back my criticism. For now, this would work in our favor. "Out the airlock, aim for about Five aurons."

Cadbury balked, "How am I supposed to aim for a time?"

The ovular ships followed suit as I led them in a gentle weaving flight path. We'd need them close at hand and behind us for our next move. "The small auron hand, Nelson!" I strained as I erred up on the wheel to watch the three ships collide before changing the weaving path. Keep them guessing. But one could only keep a proper ruse up for so long. The element of surprise was expiring.

"I can't–I never figured out how to tell time on an analog clock," Cad admitted.

I chanced a look over at his seat. "You mean to tell me you *never* read those manuals I gave you?" Analog was considered glitch-proof compared to digital. Not true, but they *were* harder to tamper with without serious commitment. The safest bet for a ship flying under the radar.

"No, Captain," Nelson said.

I didn't bother to comment further. "Usher?"

The Doctor had taken advantage of the lull in dangerous swerving to stumble to the grime grinder, a garbage compacting device we'd lifted from a garage sale in the Neolevy quadrant. "Five O'Auron, got it, Captain," Ush reported. "To be clear, should I use *all* the Bactericlean?"

"Just a few drops should do," I said, grinning so widely it hurt. One knew a plan was already awry when they were the only one thinking it. "That stuff spreads like mintweed."

Usher donned the exposure gloves from the supply closet in the corridor. Headed back toward the airlock.

Cad blushed, “I’ll hold her feet.” He followed Ush.

Pool avoided Cad’s gaze as he left the cabin, but crowded around the rear monitor to watch the hatch open and Ush’s gloves pop out. Thick, padded, silver, and clutching the ground garbage that smelled so sour I thought I might give Ant’s vomit on the floor some company.

“HOLD!” I shouted, spinning the rudder switch to shift the rear ailerons diagonally and give the entire Kylix a sideways tilt. “NOW!”

Where River would have slammed into the underbelly of the Kylix, they, instead, slammed into a wall of stinking trash sludge.

A wet smack echoing throughout the Kylix as the two other pods followed suit. Just as I thought they might, the pods spun wildly, trying to dislodge the thick blanket smeared across their windshields. Each idling to avoid collisions, drifting to Five O’Wash, the designated rest location for injured crafts. One every pilot was taught to keep an eye out for injured compeers hovering within.

When I guided the Kylix over the three pods, though, it wasn’t to dispatch assistance.

Ush used a mediPatch blaster to shoot the small orange drops of Bactericlean across the narrow distance between us and the pods.

The liquid bubbled on impact with the sludge, and got to work replicating. Thick green frothing carpets of hungry, swarming bacteria blooming across the three cosmopods. Encasing them as easily as a closing mouth.

“You did amazing!” Ant cheered, closing her arms around my neck from behind in a hug that included the back of my chair. “Now, what’s the plan?”

Pool's eyes were all orange, now. And all six blazing as hotly as any fire. "What do you mean?" they snapped. "We're not being chased, we should get as far away from them as possible."

Ant didn't relent, standing straight with her hands placed on my shoulders from behind. Even though she didn't ask, I knew this gesture meant to back her up. "That's ridiculous," she said. "Why should we put off being pursued for later?"

Pool spoke curtly, "So we have more time to find out what they're pursuing *exactly*."

Ant's face flushed a deep and mottled purple. "I may need some more training behind the wheel–more than I thought–but those jynkaleids aren't riding us as hard as the pilots they report to will."

She had a point, there. What was the word Pool had used? Eldeniv? The original survivors. These pilots would be more skilled, battle-hardened, even. Vengeful.

Pool eyed Antiope. "You speak so surely about ending the lives of the endangered," she sniffed. "Almost as if you've done it before."

I understood, then, what exactly Pool and River had discussed via the neural network. "That part's true," I said. We had to get this out of the way. "For good reason."

"Then explain yourself!" Pool blared, stabbing a finger at the cosmopods still half-encased through the oval window. "And get us *far away from them*."

I took care of that last part, taking advantage of a nearby pebbleBelt to shift into a different starstream. The different colors and placements of these would confuse anyone, a unique arrangement from the glittering tapestry just hundreds of cometons to the third wash.

Antiope sat on the smooth metal floor as we jetted out of the belt. Set the suitcase down, carefully. "It's not mine, I…kind of confiscated it from a crime scene. Something those

Kaleidizens must be a part of, some kind of extremist group." She fumbled with the latches, but undid them after a moment. Opened the suitcase, the foam inside cushioning the bottled black hole in the center.

Pool's expression soured. "River was *right*?" Their glare didn't dwell on Ant, on the floor, for long. Turning their accusing, orange glare onto me. "You *knew* about this?"

"For, like, twenty avins more than you, Pool," I assured them. "Trust me, I'm not happy about it, but Ant didn't have any other place to go, and we can't let any humans or Kaleidizens get their hands on this."

Cad swooned in the mouth of the corridor. "Coffee," he muttered. "I haven't had enough, I must be hallucinating. Withdrawal can do that…"

Ush only planted herself in her seat, swivelled to the control panel, and said, "What's your plan, Captain?"

I explained as well as I could. Not like any of us were in denial about our situation. Food was scarcer by the wash, the only things thriving in space being grains and potatoes. But there was an infectious soil-based bacteria infecting vast swathes of Harvesa crops. The Blight turning the potatoes to rotten black mash, and the wheat to wilt.

Nutrisoup, concocted in the Colonies with ingredients fresh from Earth, was expensive, and drokens were only getting harder to come by given the dragoons' tightening hold on transport. "I'm as devoted to Antiope as all of you," I emphasized. "Cad, I've known you since I was so hungry I couldn't lift a sheet of paper. Ush, you've fixed me up more times than I could count. Pool, you've talked us out of more jams than a computer can count. It's my turn, ours to end this game with Aries and make a home somewhere. Land for good."

Pool was the first to respond, all three of my friends gaping at me and silent before the Kaleidizen glided across the cockpit, and whipped the back of their scaled hand across Antiope's face. Though they shimmered with rage as Ant cried out, a red print throbbing on her cheek, their voice was collected as they said, "No."

This snapped Cad to attention, shielding the Translations Officer from my sabers as I lunged. Snarling over Cad's muscled shoulder as he restrained me. "Jean, deep breaths. Pool, you went too far. Violence is never the answer!"

Venom oozed past Pool's needle-thin teeth. "If you think that was violent, just wait until you hear what happened to the Andromeda!"

"None of that is Ant's fault!" There was no way to maul Pool without getting past Cadbury, so I spat over the First Mate's shoulder at the Translation Officer. "As your Captain, I am enforcing Antiope's right to comfort as a member of this crew."

Pool sneered, mimicking my earlier words, "Then it's a good thing that you're not a real Captain."

"It's okay, Jean," Ant soothed, stroking my ear. "I understand there's a lot of baggage around my name, what I've done to get the Blunder…"

"I don't approve of lethal force in any way," Cad said, "but, Pool, you have to admit this could be our big break. We might not ever have anything so valuable again."

"It's not *about* value," Pool insisted, pacing the length of the cockpit. "It's about *blood*. That black hole, to me, represents the near-extinction of my kind, and the complete loss of hundreds of peoples. Their lives, their cultures. Entire languages will never be spoken, again, and it's because of *your father*." Pool sniffed at Antiope. Spikes trembling. Seeming to grow even

longer. “I mean, Jean, *think*. I understand you humans have certain social needs, but isn’t it enough I’m letting the Colonizer-spawn move in with us?”

Despite myself, I stood, putting an arm out in front of Ant. “Letting?”

“It’s *my* ship just as well as yours,” Pool snapped. “All of ours! I have a right to veto this plan, and I choose to invoke it.” Pool’s blazing orange eyes flicked to Cad. “Nelson?”

Cad hesitated. “I…Pool, I respect you so much. I know with everything you’ve been through…Grievers have been through a lot, too…”

“Enough!” Pool said. “Are you with me or not?”

Cad threw up his arms. “I’m with *both* of you! I see your side, Pool, but I’m also tired of being hungry all the time. The land-ridden, they always seem to have food…Ways to grow more…I could start a garden, maybe…”

“Forget about you, then,” Pool turned to Ush. “What do you think, Doc?”

Ush stroked her chin, reached into the wide pocket of that black lab coat and pulled out a black droken. Clutched it, flipped it, turned it over and over. “I think everyone in this room is thinking with their genitals.” She shook her head, chuckled darkly. “Cad, I’ve been patient, but this madness has gone on long enough. Everyone knows you’re in love with Pool–”

A stone formed in my throat. Holy shit. I mean, yeah, we all knew, including Pool, but no one–*no one*– had ever come out and just said it. Ush pressed on, despite Cad’s sputtering protests. “Don’t try to deny it, I’ve seen your visojecter history.”

“I was only curious!” Cad insisted, turning to Pool. “It’s not like they teach you how it works with humans, even, in General Colony Courses. I didn’t want to accidentally be disrespectful, I’ve never had the right instincts for that kind of thing. So I did some research on

the Kaleidizen body–Biologically, that is–Scientifically–" He was beginning to stammer, and sweat. More than anything, sweat.

"You don't have to explain yourself, Nelson," Pool soothed, their tone half-annoyed and half-sincere. "I've, uh, done *similar research*." Their dewlap inflated partially, and they stroked it to get it to go down.

Ush rolled her eyes into the next dimension. "Just give each other a physical demonstration, already. Obviously, you two are into each other, and we're all sick of pretending you're not. Nelson, your pent up emotions are creating a tense workplace that is difficult to communicate clearly in. Either *go for it* or admit you're a coward!" Ush spun on her heels to address Pool. "Vy-Kaleidizen, I've worked with you for five yushes, and never in that time have you ever mentioned what happened to the Andromeda. Seeing your old friend shook loose some guilt, or trauma, or, I don't know, *attraction*–because, remember everyone–they're moulting, in heat, and *not thinking clearly*. That's one hell of a coincidence: We have one run-in with someone from your past, and you're preaching to the choir about justice, law, and order, when none of us has ever given a shit about that."

"HEY!" Pool interjected, but Ush was on a roll, spinning to face me.

"At last, we come to our oh-so in-love Captain, whisking their girlfriend off for a bomb-riddled septend among the stars, which I'm sure her father will take no notice of. Get real, Jean. If your veins weren't so pumped full of hormones, you'd have enough sense to reason that this entire plan is ridiculous, malformed, and short-sighted–"

"Okay, *one*," I said, "You have *got* to stop snooping into the visolog search history. *Two*: I've been the same old horny xeno the whole time I've piloted this crew, nothing's changed just because–just because–"

"Say it, Jean!" Ush was all-out shouting, now. "Just because you're screwing one of the crewmates! Say it, so you can hear how nonsensical you're being. Of course the dynamic is changing, you're favoring the goals and feelings of the person you're *fucking*! And over your own *friends*!"

"We haven't even had sex, yet!" My voice had risen to meet hers, on the ceiling. "I haven't had sex in *three yushes* because I didn't want either of you to think I was prioritizing a lover over our crew."

Ush took a few steps back at this. Physically backing into the wall to heave through several long, deep breaths. "I, uh, didn't know that."

"Yeah, well," I fought to bring my own voice down, but something nakedly wild was brewing in me, now. "You don't know everything, after all, *Doctor*."

Ush may have backed off, but she was far from cowering in a corner. "I know that none of you trust me as much as you do each other." There was a melancholy bite to her tone as she explained, "Romance–that kind of closeness–breeds loyalty more than anything. Loyalty breeds trust, trust breeds belief. But *I'm* loyal to the safety of this crew."

Ush crossed the cabin to the pilot's seat, and I thought she might sit in it. Didn't put it past her til she draped her arm over the chair at the pilot's right hand, and sat in that, instead. "It's about time someone started thinking logically around here." Ush fiddled with the rightside inboard climate control panels, peering at a screen embedded in the dashboard. "According to the interior climate logs, the Kylix has withstood below-freezing temperatures before. The planeton-gauge lines up with a series of deliveries to the Reaches."

"The interi-what?" Cad said.

"The Reaches?" Pool repeated. If Inner Space belonged to the Colonies, and Open Space belonged to the Grievers, then Outter Space belonged to no one. The Reaches were always that, just out of reach. "Don't they call it that because you die before you reach it?" It seemed Kaleidizens had similar stories about Outter Space.

"It would take us forever to cross the Milky Way *and* the Caniscen with a local-drive engine," Cad said. "Plus it would take us too far from potential customers, and too far from the typical food-routes. It's suicide."

"It's the only way," Ush corrected him. "We need to safely dispose of the Blunder in an abandoned galaxy. It'll take a few yushes to find a perfect spot, and to sweep it for life, make absolute sure no one gets hurt–"

"That would be a waste, Ush," I said. "Thank you, but I can love Antiope and do what's best for everyone at the same time."

"Can you?" Ush shot back, rising from Nelson's seat at the control panel. "You've let your emotions get in the way of every decision you've made since you named Cad First Mate!"

Woof. Forget the love confession, the stony quiet that overtook the cabin, then, was downright lethal. "You weren't questioning my decision-making when I let a high-rank medical professional–someone *trackable* and useful to the Colonies–move aboard. Did you ever think about what kind of risk I took taking you in?"

"Jean–" Ush began, but I cut her off with an incisive bleat.

"I let you in with no judgement," I continued. "At great personal risk to myself, Cadbury, and Pool. Even though I didn't know anything about you, except that, like me, you were running from something."

Ush kept her eyes steely and hard. If Pool's burned with rage, hers burned with bitter secrets. "I'm not questioning your decision-making, Captain," she said plainly. "I'm questioning your self awareness."

"*Enough*," I snorted. "Whether you like it or not, I'm the Captain. *This* is our best bet at freedom. No arguments."

Now, Pool came to Ush's defense. "Captain, you shouldn't–"

"*YOUR CAPTAIN HAS SPOKEN*." Another, finite bleat burst out of me, and radiated across the room. Leaving no room for discussion, and nothing but quiet in its wake.

As far as intimate items went in space, the matteratom was the ultimate tool. It looked like a heavy, metal pen. With a nib that could produce liquid atoms. Hardening as you drew so they went from invisible, to damp and limp, to firm, weighty, visible, and very real. The substance could be formed into a receptacle, or penetrator, hence the device's popularity among crowded Orbiter crafts.

It wasn't exactly a sex toy, advertised on the digital billboards drifting through space as a state of the art leak-patching solution. If anything, more often than not, the typical use was to draw menstrual cups. The things drawn expired into purple goo after aurons–or washes, or never, depending on the setting. The goo evaporated into purple mist within avins, a handy function for keeping clutter down aboard our already buckling craft.

Pool had connections with a manufacturing distributor–someone from Uranus University–that kept us fully stocked up on CompactSacks. The handy, high-tech vacuum sealing bags for emergency waste collection during severe meteor storms when no one could exit their sleepmodule and stumble to the chuteroom.

As for contraception, the Colonies had insured every Griever was on their own. Terrex law prohibited federal funding of distribution or education efforts regarding “perversive items.” Insertion of such items by a doctor would result in the imprisonment of patient and professional. Sterilation surgery required an invasive physical and mental evaluation by a judge-appointed physician, as well as the permission of the five Colony Council representatives *and* one Constable assigned to oversee the Envoys stationed on each planet.

We had a depleting source of condoms kept in the dispenser beside the med-bay, but it hadn’t been refilled in ages. I was relieved enough find three blanketed in dust. Then embarrassed because, if there were so few, it would be undeniable I used one.

*Note to self,* I slid one into my suit pocket, and closed the dispenser. *Restock condoms*.

Ant lingered near the rectangular indentation in the wall I called a room. As the Captain, my module was the nearest to the corridor feeding into the deck. Cad’s was just a few brisk steps across the way and down a bit. We staggered like that so no one was just across from each other. This was standard as to make it easier to fall in a line and hustle to the control panel, given the dusty orange emergency lights were flashing. “Is this your address, or are we at the wrong house?”

“Oh, yeah,” I said aloud, despite myself. “I forgot that’s what they call those land ships.”

She placed a hand on the rusted handle in the wall, and eased it upward. Three crushed and twisted cans of Kylix Kölsch rolled out of my module. One spewing dewey droplets of sour beer across Ant’s boots. “I suppose you’re the crew taste-tester.”

“You suppose correctly,” I scooped them up in one motion. Jogged to the minicinerator to drop each one in. They’d be more useful as tin bars, anyway. Those were a good snack for Tendon, or, at least, I could tell myself that.

Ant had already climbed inside, dispensing with my need to explain why a Captain must be nearest to the exit.

I used the single indentation in the wall to heft myself up after her, drawing the hatch closed behind us so the flickery embedded bulbs above blinked on, bathing us in warm, low, yellow light.

“Is the far side okay with you?” I said, partially to keep the topic off of what I knew was buzzing dully at the back of both of our minds, and partially because I was suddenly hyper-aware of how small my module was.

They were built to accommodate up to three people, in case of emergency, so it had never exactly felt like a coffin. But there was hardly any way to position ourselves wherein we weren’t touching. “We can switch places if you want, I don’t want you to feel closed in.” I looked past her, at my shadow shimmering on the metal wall. The sharp ends of my horns jutting out of the otherwise human silhouette. I thought back to the Sack of Kaysev. A tremble I didn’t recognize gripping my fingers, then my entire hands. “I don’t want to make you feel like you have to do anything, just because we live together, now. Just because I’m–”

“What?” Ant reached out, closing her hand around my left horn, and urging my face closer to hers. “Xeno?” She kissed the top of my horn, ran her tongue along the length of it.

Gently, I pulled away from her. No matter how often I blunted the end of my horns, they’d always grow sharpened, again. “Don’t say it like it’s so ridiculous,” I said. “You haven’t seen the things I have, Ant. Xenos are designed to hurt people.”

“I’m not afraid of you, Jean,” Ant insisted, blushing. “I know you and your crew have seen a lot more than me, but I’m not so naive that I don’t know the Colonies make people do brutal things to keep itself going. That’s why I know you’ll never hurt me, you already decided

for yourself what your body is for: Protecting people you love, and *pleasure*." Carefully, she seized the sensitive base of each horn, and rubbed the black cartilege. The sound that came out of me was neither xeno nor human. "This feels good, right?" She cast her eyes to the blankets. "I want to do this, but, well…I'm a *Terran,* Jean. Repression is written in my genes, and I'm still figuring that out, but the last thing I'd want to do is disrespect your body."

"Neither would I," I said, hurriedly. This was something that had to be established. The foundation for any kind of bedroom encounter, no matter how brief. "Believe me, stuff like this doesn't come easily to Grievers, either. We're only–Uh, only…"

"Human," Ant supplied, pressing her mouth to mine. She was making a concentrated effort to keep our groins from grazing, leaning over so only our upper-bodies connected. For a while, we gave extra attention to each others' breasts. Beneath the blankets, between my legs, that hot, wet, pressurized sensation shivered up from my belly into my throat. I hadn't thought much about grooming in that area, or anywhere, really, and wondered, now, what the standards were on Earth.

Not like there'd be any taming my hair, anyway. See, xenos were hairier than the average human. Those individual blades coarse and thick in the usual bushy hotspots: Under our arms, along the sides of our limbs, occasionally between our nipples. The follicles sprouted hardened hair the further south one ventured down a xeno's body, though. The hair surrounding the genitals nigh-impervious to attempted grooming, strong as wire, and tapering to still-thick ends where it laced the most sensitive organs.

Ant braced a hand on my boxers, panting. "What should I do next?"

"Take them off me," I blurted. "Um, I have old scratching scars but I haven't had MarStar in yushes. What about–?"

"I was vaccinated," said Ant. "Back on Earth, they inoculate for that."

"I see," I said, careful to keep my voice neutral. I was glad we were both safe, of course. *Of course*. But a small part of me panged with jealousy at the revelation. Three septurs of scratching. My clit was still scarred, even. Module-ridden misery, assuaged only by Cad's donation of aloe from the plant he kept in a large, lit cabinet within the supply closet doubling as a garden.

Ant slipped a finger under my waistband. I helped her ease my underwear off. She ran a warm palm over my darkened Mar scars. The signature star-shaped pattern, webbing over my thighs, my groin… She stopped at my groin, tangled over with black hair, as my head was. Even dreaded in some spots, the strands thickly interlocking. "What would you like, now?"

"Touch me–Well, I don't mean to sound bossy." There was the matter of our minute imbalance. I was the Captain, though the title's responsibilities only extended as far as the corridor. In bed, usually, I tried to check that balance often. Make sure I was leaving room for my partner to make their requests.

"It's okay," Antiope took the condom I handed her. "That's one of the things I like about you. It would actually take a lot of the pressure off if you took charge, Captain."

"Aye, aye," I uttered, relief washing through me. I'd gotten so worked up about not leading this encounter, I'd forgotten how much I enjoyed being in the pilot's seat. "In that case, I'd really like to get on top of you."

Ant wasn't entirely stripped, yet. Her suit half-peeled off the way it'd been back on her ship. She rolled so our hips, at last, met. "Is *this* okay?"

"Of course," I eased my leg over her waist, straddling her. Crouching so my head grazed the ceiling, so our hips did more than just *meet*. "You're the most beautiful woman in the universe."

Antiope glanced at my hamper, the gleaming, bulky metal pen poking out of a bundle of sweat-stained spacesuits. "I've never used a matt-at," she said. "It might take some practice."

I nipped at her neck, her sweet throat. That little hollow above the collar where the sweat pooled. I lapped it up, tasted all of her. "We can take it slow, at first," I suggested softly. My harness was tucked under my thin mattress–thick, leather, and stolen from 'Venus Envy,' the same sex shop every orbitter boosted their matter atom from.

It took some effort to free it while we were on top of it, but I was fumbling into it in no time. Thrusting one leg through, kneeing Ant in the chest in the process.

"Sorry," I said.

"Relax," Ant giggled. "I'm not going to write you up for 'Assault on an Envoy Officer.'"

"Then what *are* you going to write me up for?" I pulled my other leg through the harness. Snapped the long, leather ropes through the metal buckles along the waist. The design was very much like a thong, but with an empty silicone ring at the front.

I handed Ant the matter-atom.

She weighed it in her arms as if it were the latest edition of her assigned weaponry. "Being such a ruthless tease," she blushed. Tracing the circumference of the matt-at to find the on switch.

It buzzed to life, vibrating as the purple ooze excreted out of the end. "You sure you can take all that?"

At this, Ant found the rungs along my waist. Used them to hold me fast to her hot, flushed skin as she tenderly inserted the dildo into the empty ring. “Sure I can, Captain,” she winked. “But it’s always a close call.” Now, it was her turn to tease me. Fingers gliding to my horns to trace the tips like one would tease a nipple. Drawing out a not disimilar sensation.

“Oh, Ant,” every part of me ached to be inside her.

“Oh– OUCH!”

Ant drew back, a long, thin cut slashed diagonally across her palm. Hints of green welling in the shallow wound, at first, before spilling onto our sheets.

“Are you hurt?” I shifted off of her. It took a few seconds to reconcile the color with injury.

“I’m fine,” Ant insisted. She winced as I examined her hand. “It’s nothing major, just a gusher.”

She was right. Her palm had dragged along the tip of my horn, and the wound just wouldn’t stop bleeding. And not red blood like humans or xenos, or gold ichor like Kaleidizens. But deep green amulius, the blood of an Adams.

“I might be able to help.” It wasn’t like it needed to be sewn up, or stapled, more like submerged in water. The flow not forced shut, just stymied to ready for scabbing.

There *was* one thing about xenos hardly anyone knew. We weren’t just shredders, vicious beasts designed to tear out the entrails of our enemies. To gore them through. We were meant to *clear them out*. After the final tally, every part of the purged species was feasted on. Meat, bones, organs spiced and tenderized. Eyes pickled and paired with ice in the celebratory wine, which wasn’t wine at all, but was just as red.

Before I could think better to, I licked the length of Antiope's wound. Gulped down the metallic blood. Bit back the savory aftertaste that made me want more.

My saliva coated the thin slit, so the cut only remained pink, and bled no more.

"Whoa," Ant flexed her fingers. "How did you–?"

"Xeno trick," I said. "Our spit acts like a bonding agent, it speeds up recovery, too."

"It tingles," grinned Ant. "You've been holding out on me."

"Starshine," I took ahold of the zipper hovering over her groin. "You've got no idea."

For a while, I waited. Let her grind the stiff bulge against my hand. Kissed her so deeply I was dizzy by the time we separated. Hated that it was possible for us to separate. All of me throbbing to become a part of her. "We don't have to do that kind of thing," she tensed, blushing.

"What kind of thing?" I said. "Pleasure you?"

"I just don't want you to feel like you have to."

"I don't," I assured her. "I *want* to."

Antiope studied my expression for a few axons before releasing a long, steadying breath. "If you're sure…"

"I am," I said. I eased her zipper down.

Unlike the unkempt, slimy, tangled coil of barbs obscuring my fleshy crater, her organ protruded politely from a bramble of black curls. Her blush had touched more than her cheeks. Peachy in color, swollen, and glistening at the tip, which was pearly and shedding droplets of clear liquid at the end of her saber-length shaft. The fluid trailing down to her tan, fist-sized scrotum–the only truly descriptive word for which was: Adorable.

Adamists could whip themselves into such a tizzy over the most insignificant things: Daylight savings, the hue of one's skin, what happened to populate the space between one's legs.

Who called themselves what, and when, and why it was so important. Antiope's organ seemed so ladylike and feminine, there was no tactile difference whatsoever when I handled it versus any other. And no change in my desire, either.

I renewed my grip on the velvety shaft. She sucked in a sharp breath. "Is *this* good? Or should I–I have lube if you want me to, uh–"

Ghost words, maybe better left unsaid to keep Ant's dysphoria at bay. On Wolfthrop, the scientists had jotted our genders down as one would an animal's, but the Adamist principles guiding our instruction was as forcibly-gendered as any human text.

The courses we were expected to thrive in depended, somehow, on how the fleshy nubs between our legs were shaped. Masterful *Confrontational Procedures* for males, impeccable *Evasive Manuevers* for females. Expert *Supportive Services* for females, noteworthy *Flight Path Accuracy* for males. But there was no narrative to my gender the way there had been for Antiope, no expectations except that I mutilate those we conquered who happened to be male, rather than the females. The details were something I was still working on being sensitive of.

"Whatever you want to do," she let out that breath in a sing-songy groan. Leaning over to kiss me. Her tongue wet and electric when it parted my lips. "Whatever you're *comfortable* doing."

I rooted around in the hamper until my fingers closed around a little bottle of *Get-In Goo* water-based lubrication. Another treasure from Venus Envy. "Sorry about the name," I said. This had become a reflex to say. The brand name was to the point, if not very romantic.

I squeezed just a drop of the cool, viscous goop into my palm before smearing it across my palm. Coating it over Antiope in a series of progressively tighter applications that made the Constable give a strangled yelp.

More liquid dribbled out of her, still clear, but in much larger drops that I tasted when I tenderly licked her. Salt, sweat, and Antiope Adams.

I traced my fingers along her thighs, exploring her smooth, lovely skin for so long I grew entranced in the gentle thrum of her green veins. Just under that pale skin.

Antiope took my hand, gingerly. Guiding my fingertip to the smooth, tan interstice just under her scrotum. “You have any more of that lube?”

“Oh *yes*!” I applied some to her anus.

She applied some to the dildo. Shivered under me as I crouched at the end of the bed. Hoisted her folded legs on top of my thighs. Lined me up for entry. “Now.”

She swallowed me smoothly, groaning. Stroking my horn as I fucked her.

I watched the pleasure play across her face, take ahold of her in a way I’d never seen but couldn’t imagine going on without: Black, wide eyes fixed on me, twitching. Drool pooling in one corner of her mouth. Her womanly appendage growing so much perkier at each entry, I was beginning to wonder if loving her like this was only bringing her further from relief. Until she shuddered, yanked me forward, and fucked herself on me.

Hey, I wasn’t complaining. She knew herself better than anyone, which meant I had the best teacher in the galaxy on the subject of pleasing her.

That, and it was mesmerizing watching her sink herself onto me. The lube squelching out around the base of the dildo in time with her breath. “I don’t just accept you, Jean,” she rasped. “I *want* you.”

“I want you, too, Ant,” I said. “I need you like water, I mean it. You’re the moon to me.”

Ant blushed, gently nudged me off of her.

“Sorry–” I said. “Are you okay?”

"*Very* okay," she assured me. "It actually feels so good, it's overwhelming."

I slipped out of the harness, stuffed it into the hamper.

Ant shivered, so I held her.

Savored the sound of her labored breathing misting my ear. All at once, gaining a new appreciation for Octil body music.

Or maybe just Antiope's body music.

"What about you, Jean?" For now, she dropped the Captain stuff, and I was glad for it. A Captain woud know what should come next, a lover, however…

The answer was clear and simple in my mind, but difficult to articulate. Not least of all because I hadn't, well, *accommodated* anyone in years. That part of me–the wet, tucked away part–was easy to forget about. I would've preferred to forget about it, most washes. It wasn't like I had gotten much out of it, save for an inconvenient red shower once a month and a debilitating yeast infection twice back in twenty-one-seventy-two.

Landred, an Octil ex I'd dated for three septurs, had used his hands to explore me a few times. Trickle, a vy-kaleidizen I'd enjoyed a casual septend-long tryst with, had used their rhizomes to enter me. The act had been sort of impersonal because of the amount of time they spent there, but I also understood that a Kaleid couldn't be asked to adhere to human social norms.

"I really want you inside," I said, and it didn't feel strange to state aloud at all. The ship was vacuum sealed to keep us from choking on the endless black sea that conceived us, and I wanted Antiope Adams inside my body.

Before I could lose my resolve, I pulled the condom out of my suit pocket. "Xenatex is a trusted brand, it's not latex but it's well tested, so there shouldn't be any–I mean, if you were

worried about–" I couldn't decide which myth to broach. Worried that my hole was lined with teeth. Worried that I was so boiling hot inside her genitals would melt clean off.

"I know you wouldn't hurt me," said Ant. "Not on purpose. It's not *that* I'm worried about, anyway. I've been tested, and you told me about that MarStar thing, but Ush treated you. So if we slipped up–I mean, if there was a mistake and you–"

"Got pregnant?" I supplied, though the word curdled the air of the module. Ant tensing against me as I said it. "I'm not sure that would be just *my* mistake. Conception's more of a two-way starlane, if you ask me."

"Of course!" Ant said, quickly. "I didn't mean to imply it wasn't. I just feel so disconnected from that kind of…*function*."

"So do I," I said, and it was true. The sex organs seemed to come with so much baggage, expectation, and responsibility. In the fog of what everyone believed about me just based on them, there seemed hardly any room for what I thought of my own body. "I don't *agree* with that function, I hardly agree with anything about myself."

Ant gave me a small smile, just the hint of one. "Then we can agree on that," she affirmed. "I'm not *trying* to make a mistake. Trust me, I hate having Adams blood, I wouldn't wish a life like that on anyone. You're not–?"

Right, it was about time we got to this. Before we got carried away. "Birth control is harder to come by than streaker," I said somberly. When it came to reproductive justice, the matter was a tombstone all its own. "And, anyway, I'm–I'm bipolar, Antiope. Messing with my hormones really isn't ideal, my body doesn't like it. My *brain* doesn't. And condoms are the only barrier, really, that's easy to get ahold of." Terrex always *did* go after shipments of diaphragms, and IUDs. The methods targeted at who they really wanted to strip of their rights.

As far as the Colonies were concerned, a “woman” was a greased tube attached to an incubation machine.

“There’s no doctor alive who would carry through with a vasectomy attached to my name,” Antiope groaned, thumping the metal plating of the walls. “God, I hate having balls! All they do is make me gigantic, and make it so we can’t–”

“Be close to each other,” I said. Ant knew well enough my persistent disgust with my own role in the whole awful affair of conception. She spoke more, and I listened, and wasn’t sure if this was the type of vent session I should reply to immediately until she urged me on with black, watery eyes. “You might be able to talk to Usher about an operation, but it might not be completely reversible.”

“Why would I want it to be?” said Ant. “You don’t want to reproduce, neither do I.”

“I just mean we’ve only been together, really, for a few octavers in total, minus all the separation and misunderstandings.” Maybe it was the little Ush on my shoulder, but a strange sense of responsibility fell over me, then. We were homeless, after all. Plans didn’t always shake out in favor of one’s ideals. “If we split up, and, I don’t know, you met someone who *did* want that…”

“Then I’d have to tell them the chances of us conceiving don’t look too good after years of Hormone Replacement Therapy.”

“It’s not impossible,” I said, Cad had mentioned as much over coffee, more than once. “You should hold off, if you think there’s even a possibility we might not stay together. I wouldn’t want to be the reason you permanently change your future.”

“You already are,” Ant insisted.

"Still," I said. Grievers knew well enough what a series of closing hatches this life was, I couldn't bear to think of Ant yearning some unreachable future because of me. Me and my animal impulsiveness. No consequence, just action. My ugly, glitchy programming.

As if she could read my mind, Ant placed a palm on my thigh. Stroked the downy hair there. "What are you thinking right this second?"

"I'm thinking," I said, "that your balls are really adorable."

It was a silly kind of thing to say, but I didn't regret it, and, when we kissed, then, there was no humor whatsoever to the act. Antiope applied the condom after inspecting the little square black foil packaging. Or tried to.

It was weirdly dry, and took some difficulty to roll from the tip to the base of her organ. "What does '*2172'* mean? It's, uh, the only thing typed on the back." She blushed. "I've never used one of these before."

"It's okay," I said. "Neither have I." I tried to think through the cloud of primal arousal drawing around my brain. Instructions for use of contraceptive devices was considered Decimation of Treasonous Materials and Assisting in Misconduct, so directions had long-disappeared from the back of condom packaging. The only connection I could make was that Twenty-One Seventy-Two–three yushes ago–had been the yush Cad had acquired this particular batch, dropping a handful into the transparent dispenser. "I guess that's the production yush." That wouldn't be that strange, after all. My legal name was *my* production yush.

She considered this a moment. "You're the Captain, Jean," she said. "I don't have a lot of experience with this kind of thing, and I don't want you to feel like you have to do anything. Whatever you say right now goes."

"Now," I panted, taking ahold of her hips as I shifted to be on top of her, once more. "If you want, you can enter me."

An almost vicious torrent of pleasure surged through me as she moved inside me, then. A great, gurgling shout leapt out of my throat before I could think to hold it back.

Ant kissed me, pulled back to inspect my face. "Are you okay?" She glanced at the closed hatch on the end of the module. "Should we try to keep quiet?"

"I'm fine, don't worry," I said. "And don't worry about them, either. They can't hear us. There's a muted barrier glazed over the steel. We got it for free in exchange for a shipment of Special Edition Garlic Sours. Never saw the appeal of that batch, but I'm picky."

Antiope stifled a laugh. "Picky?" she said. "Look around, you've lived in the Kylix for the last five years. It doesn't take much to satisfy you." We laughed, and kissed, and fucked.

Not talked, not for a while. For now, it was that breath-exchange one shares in moments of passion or fear. Body-music. Body-talk. Body.

I went for her jugular, taking some of the skin into my teeth. Chewing gently, so as not to break skin.

The gesture seemed to draw something out of Ant. She panted through several long upward strokes as I gripped her waist from above. I went off in her arms like how a star goes supernova. Burning brighter, hotter, bigger until everything that made me one thing was depleted, and there was only to move into the breathless, sweat-soaked, throbbing after.

After all the anticipation, it took a long while to come down from the rush. Ant still beneath me, still tucked snugly into my inner recesses so I was acutely aware of my insistent throbbing around her.

I didn't realize until then that I'd worried about feeling invaded–about a loss of control. It wasn't an Ant thing, not about her being an Adams. But more of a dysphoria thing.

At the moment, though, I didn't feel like I was surrendering to Antiope. Rather, I felt–was witnessing–her surrender to me.

The pale yellow light above twinkled in her eyes like some kind of very exclusive observatory exhibit. Gold flecks gliding as she whimpered, and an expression I figured wouldn't be far off from a spacewalking orbitter losing grip of their tether flashed across her face.

I held her through it, brought my palms from her gorgeous breasts to her mouth-watering waist. A single drop of my own drool rolled down my saber and splashed onto her, close to the navel. "Let me know when, okay?"

"When," said Ant, drawing out of me gently. She held the condom tight to her, only removing it when she was clear of me. Tying it into a slimy knot, glistening with my contributions on the outside, and Antiope's on the inside. This liquid was no longer clear, but cloudy and whitish. "I haven't come like that in forever."

"What about Bland Bill?" Bland Bill Windsor was a Terran that Ant had attended Colony College with. He'd pleased her physically, Ant had told me, but not in any other way. Which was fine by him, as his mother had been caught gossiping about Aries Adams during a Congressional Dinner. They were fuck-friends for just a semester.

"In action, but rarely sensation," said Ant. "Or, sometimes, the other way around. My Hormone Replacement Therapy makes it a little tricky for me to orgasm. Don't get me wrong, my injections are an actual life-saver, but it's a hell of a trade-off." She flung a sweating forearm across her forehead in a show of mock theatrics. "Being beautiful isn't easy."

"Maybe," I curled up under my half of the blankets, "but you sure make it look like it is." Beneath them, a dull, constant, throbbing ache intermingled with the pulsing pleasure. Lubricant, storebought and self-made, drooled out of me in a thin, snotty paste that left a tacky, flaky residue on my thighs, and on the blankets. Terrans had such strange associations with either gender. After sex, it alway seemed so ridiculous that tidy, chaste, and withholding were traits prescribed to people with muffs, considering the actual organ wasn't unlike an insatiable, slavvering maw.

Ant stroked my horn.

A contented hum caught in my throat to get my glottis to shiver, another sound I hadn't managed to control, but one I vastly preferred to bahing or bleating: Purring.

Ant snuggled into me. "You're loud, tonight."

"Sorry," I tried to swallow the sound, but it continued to reverberate through my throat and chest. "I've been practicing getting it to stop, but–"

"No, don't stop," Ant murmured. "I like feeling how pleased you are." So I didn't stop, allowed my tail to wander in that way it did when I wasn't paying attention to it. Flicking through the air, fickle, resting across our bodies, then whipping into the hatch with a soft, tinny thud just as quickly. "I'm sorry I pissed everybody off."

"They're always pissed," I lied. "Don't worry about them, they'll come around. After everything we've been through, they know I only want the best for everyone."

"Still…" Ant said. "You've all been friends for so long, I've never seen any one of you storm off, not to mention the entire crew."

"Well, I *have* seen it," I murmured into her shoulder. Speaking against her smooth, feverish skin. "We fight all the time, Ant. You're just never around to bear witness."

"So," she leaned over to kiss me. "It's just something I'll have to get used to." Her tongue played along mine, delicious circles, sweat dribbling down our faces. "Just like this."

"That's right, moonlight," I said. I wondered, if we stayed in bed all wash, could someone else take the helm for a few aurons. One didn't need to be a doctor to know Ush was right. Maybe not about everything, but, Ant's tongue sliding past mine, I considered her questioning my loyalty. I loved Antiope, I loved the crew. But how did that love parse out between four people, evenly?

It wasn't like only Ant's love could make a risk like the one we were taking seem worthwhile. This was a gamble in the interest of everyone aboard. Part of me knew perfectly well it was a bad idea to travel with the weapon, nevermind trying to hock it in inner space with our small-time connections.

Yet, maybe there was a silver lining to my foolishness. If this paid off, it would pay off big, and in a way the whole crew would benefit from. So I allowed myself to dream. Somewhere, a distant moon. Ush, Cad, Pool, me, and Antiope. Never not satisfied.

Grievers had no legends, just what what Terrex left us: A penchant for misfortune, and a love for the warmth of strange stars. What we lacked, Kaleidizens had in glittering droves. Tales as numerous as the scales upon their bodies, and covering much of the same ground Terran myths did. The stories springing up from a creation well and trickling down instances in the legendary life of one particular figure.

In the heated dusk of the Andromeda's hadean washes, where the planets sported their lava on the outside crust of the in, a purple comet streaked into the galaxy and cooled the planet

it impacted on. This was Clutchinsterl, the home of the Kaleidizens, and this comet was the First Scale.

The comet's cooling mist driving the lava underground, and creating a crater that harvested the subdued heating effects to serve as the first nest for the first Kaleidizen. Springing from the scale in an instant as the conditions became just right. Wave Vy-Kaleidizen.

As the legends went, as the first Kaleidizen, Wave was lonesome. The planet was barren save for grazing creatures who had no interest in getting to know the new resident. Though this didn't stop Wave from getting to know them. For this was the only thing there was to do. It was through this learning, about the grazing beasts, and the landscape, and sky, and gooey molten glass shards, and the limits of their scales, that Wave gained the ability to sustain themself on knowledge.

In this way, Wave Vy-Kaleidizen was sort of like the god of wisdom. Not necessarily intelligence, as Wave made many mistakes in their studies, and died *many* times. Resurrected only by their desire to learn more, to apply true wisdom by avoiding the mistakes of the past.

After a trillion yushes–the legends said–Wave's voracious studies carried them to the yush they would encounter the second Kaleidizen. Flood Jyn-Kaleidizen, bathing in burbling superheated lava. Emerging from the cracking, drying magma shinier than any discovery Wave had made to that date, and arousing strange feelings in the otherwise hyperstudious Kaleid.

At first, Wave tried to impress Flood by spouting off facts about the planet the Jyn-Kaleid hadn't asked for. Indeed, that the Jyn-Kaleid already knew, as Flood wasn't truly the second Kaleidizen. Flood had touched down on the planet in much the same manner as Wave, at the same time. When Flood explained this, Wave changed tactics, and began to explain, instead, the discovery of a new illness. That which Flood inspired in them.

It's important to note, here, that Kaleidizens don't really have a word for specific love. There is, rather, *juniplia*: "Equally Affectionate One." Kaleidizens typically took two mates of equal standing for life. Keeping that balance of love between the three was basically a pillar of Kaleidizen culture.

*Juniplia* had another translation, though. A more archaic one that Flood, in myth, relayed to Wave through sculpture. Taking inspiration from their own spherical comet-based arrival and molding eggs of clay, sand, stone, and clouds. These, Flood would go on to install in the skies of Clutchinsterl, the mythical explanation for the moons and nearby planets. After this act, Flood would go on to become the equivalent of a god of art.

On one end of the Kaleid home, a third Kaleidizen, attracted to the other two by the sudden appearance of the nearest, brightest moon Skuryl, made themself known. Tide Jyn-Kaleidizen. Tide brought with them something which Flood and Wave had yet to encounter: A sphere fashioned from obsidian, a *weapon*.

At first, Flood and Wave were suspicious, but Tide soon introduced them all to their village of Kaleidizens on the other end of the planet. An entire town had formed around a forest of craters, with eggs within intricate nests of woven metal slats, and younglings learning what they could from their Vy-Jyn Kaleidizen hatchers.

As for the spears, Tide explained, under the shadier skies that predated the moon, there had been whisperings of a shift in the world. Something big was coming, and, in preparation for any danger that would come to threaten their small but thriving village, Tide had hewn a spear from volcanic glass. Had eaten of the glass, and gained the deep sight the rocks and oceans only know. Had asked of their friends to eat it, and *see* as well. To connect.

Flood and Wave were skeptical, at first, of the village. Of the presence of so many Kaleidizens in one place. But the town soon became home, and the pride of sustaining the happiness, ecosystem, and justice in the village soon taught the two that Art and Wisdom were valuable–no, *vital*–additions to any Community. And they soon came to feel great and warm *juniplia* for the Jyn-Kaleidizen, as well.

At once, another way to express this affection became *very clear* to the pair. So the three–Wave, Flood, and Tide–cast off their pleated grass gowns and exchanged griqelskin. Wave's swollen, branching mustach of nerves ushering Flood's and Tide's genetic material into their urelmaw, an organ specific to the pleasure and reproduction processes of Vy-Kaleidizens.

Secreting their own in rapturous excess.

Ironically, it was from this union that the dangerous entity Tide had sensed on the horizon emerged from. Though, not immediately. Eagre, the latent star of the Kaleidizen Codex of sacred myths, came about in the only way they knew how: Inconvenient.

Two glittering eggs were produced by Wave, and tended by a Vy-Jyn Kaleidizen who, per fledgling tradition, cared for the nest in the same way they cared for the others. The hatchlings that yawned out of the eggs showed exemplary traits from the wash of their first breaths.

One, Wave Rill Jyn-Kaleidizen, had gills. A trait no other Kaleidizen–at the time–shared, rendering them capable of travelling to Skurlys, and beyond the moon as later Kaleidizens would. Protecting the planet, then the galaxy, just as Tide protected the community.

Wave Runnel Vy-Kaleidizen, the twin egg, emerged with six eyes. This allowed for extrasight, *ultrasight*. The ability to venture into the night and see clearly, examine one's

environment. Come to know things about the planet and world those lacking sixsight would believe inconceivable for generations before the trait became a staple.

Both twins, too, were born with a connection to the burgeoning Neural Network. Obsidian in their veins, and the entire Kaleidizen culture in their brains. Both, too, were noble, serious, and always good-minded. Three things that did *not* describe a third sibling who surprised Wave on hatching wash by struggling out of their body *breathing* with gills, six eyes, and a fanged mouth oozing corrosive green fluid unknown to Kaleidizen kind until then.

Eagre Vyjyn-Kaleidizen was born shell-less, a phenomena that occurred once in every thousand Kaleid conceptions. And was considered an omen of bad luck. Kaleidizen culture was built around service, education, pursuit, and defense. Hatchlings toddled for only the wash they emerged. Only spoke gibberish for septurs. Were only helpless for aurons, tiny, soft, pale flaps hardening to vibrant scales as durable as any steel.

Eagre did something Kaleidizens were not used to: Cried.

They were needy, demanding of the attention and affection of their layer–their *cymar*–something considered more than taboo in Kaleidizen culture. Worse, Eagre wasn't obedient. Wasn't studious in any art except combat, a necessary and serious thing to Kaleids that the vyjyn-Kaleidizen used to settle petty disputes with schoolmates in their instruction washes, and barmates in their early adult yushes.

All while Rill–allegedly–strode atop liquified lava to unite distant Kaleidizen communities, sailing with them in ever-advancing skyships to distant lands to meet other kinds. Making peace, and uniting the galaxy.

Meanwhile, on Clutchinsterl, Runnel defended the Kaleidizens from an invading force of protoctils–an ancient ancestor of Octilavians. Leading a proud and peaceful diplomatic mission

to their foes crouched in waiting in an attempt to diffuse a spat of prejudiced attacks at the edge of the galaxy. An agreement would soon be reached, the protoctils pleased, and Runnel praised as a skilled negotiator.

In the yushes to come, though, Eagre only proved to be a trouble-maker. Worse, they had a knack for it. Creating the first calendar purely to sow panic into the usual timekeeping carefully kept by Kaleidizens for centuries. Wearing discarded shed scales to disguise themself as prominent council-Kaleidizens in post-meeting briefings. The yush of their twenty-fifth *Hatchinprast*, though, Eagre's pranks extended a bit too far for even the high-standing of their cymar to protect them. Something the young Kaleidizen had leaned on again and again, and that Kaleidizen culture would hold in taboo long after.

Rill the Daring and Runnel the Wise attracted potential mates far and wide, and drew favorable comparisons to one another. But Eagre was considered mischievous, burdensome on their cymar, and someone to avoid for the simmering mating season.

At first, Eagre considered this a minor set-back. Their reputation was marred, yes, but there was still in-person courtship. And everyone, most of all those who loathed the vyjyn-Kaleidizen, considered Eagre brilliant of scales and mind. Quickly, Eagre gained the attention of a rebellious vy-Kaleidizen, Brook, and a reserved jyn-Kaleid, Stream.

The three mated, and made a nest, and developed a deep, warm *juniplia* for each other. But one wash, Eagre came home to find their nestmates gone. For five washes, Eagre waited. Neither Brook nor Stream returned.

It was then, Eagre knew a powerful leader in the community had blacklisted them. Abducted, somehow disappeared, their mates. Violated their privacy and autonomy, two things Grievers and Kaleidizens held dear.

In a fit of despair, Eagre lashed out psychicly. Their six eyes growing to eight, all glowing fiery orange as the Kaleid's consciousness shout through the neural network to crash through the mind of Council-Member Wave. The utmost authority figure on Clutchinsterl, and Eagre's own cymar.

The violation was thorough enough for Wave to be traumatized for life, and for Eagre to confirm that the Council-Kaleid had stood aside as the execution of their unruly lovers was ordered. The accusation muddling the situation enough that, while Eagre wouldn't escape consequences, they *would* be given a chance to live on.

Rill and Runnel oversaw the banishment. Runnel lending the Kaleidizen an obsidian bow with a full quiver of magma-forged arrows, and Rill lending the Kaleidizen a cosmopod.

At this point, the stories diverged. Some Rill said what was said next, some say Runnel, or Flood, some say it wasn't said at all, but some well-wisher gave the trickster one more piece of advice before setting off into that wide, wild nowhere.

"*Sculean zixur clutchinuwl ofta*."

Our scales are the stardust, so you are only going home.

"Cuffed Aboard the Cosmocraft Nowhere" blared through the Kylix at such a volume, the bass vibrated even through the muting glaze. Or was that just my ears? Libby Kissel's synth-streaked screeching stabbing into my ears.

"*My ship, I call it Nowhere*

*It takes me back and forth*

*For now, the guard says I have rights*

*So exercise, of course*

*My ship, I call it Nowhere*

*It takes me up and down*

*For now, the guard says follow me*

*Oh, I'm in trouble now*

*The lights, they make me anxious*

*The smell, it makes me sick*

*The cuffs, though, compeer, are the worst*

*A fire needs a wick*

*The lights, I see them dimming*

*The smell, is fainter still*

*The cuffs, though, compeer, don't let up*

*When gold dogs claim their kill"*

"Cad," I groaned, rolling out of the module to alight in the middle of the corridor running through the ship. To my back, Antiope was still asleep. And the Great Griever knew that after all the sweat and exhaustion of last night, she needed her rest. I shut the hatch softly behind me. Closing her into the module, and shutting what noise I could out.

I didn't bother with shoes. Savored the cool touch of the metal to my feet. A jolt to the senses, but–as our instructors had reminded us about being startled in battle back on Wolfthrop–that was just proof one was alive.

The silver suitcase still hung on the hook we usually used for coats and colony propaganda featuring Aries with dicks drawn on his face. Ah, right, we hadn't stuffed it back into the cranny. When everyone padded off, I supposed there was just one thing on my mind.

Cad was kicked back in his seat. Coffee cooled and on-hand as he poured it directly into his mouth. Extended the can to me.

I took it with one hand, and twisted the middle dial of the radio counter-clockwise. "Ant's still sleeping," I said. "Please be quiet."

He swivelled in his seat as I slumped into mine. "Oh, I get it. So, one wash, it's your supersonic bat hearing or whatever and, the next, it's your *girlfriend*."

"*YOU INVITED HER ONBOARD*."

"Her," Cad snapped. "Not a bomb, Jean." He glanced back at the mouth of the hall, lowered his voice. "Do you have any idea what position I'm in? Pool hates my guts, and I–After everything Ush said they'll never–" His lip trembled. Ugh, despite everything, the lack of Nelson's usual morning cheer was as disturbing as it was sympathetic.

"Relax," I soothed, fishing out the Crew Bowl. He handed me the tin box of flakes. "Pool just needs time to cool off. We're all exhausted…"

"That's just it, Jay," Cad said. "You're the only one who benefits. I mean, your girlfriend–the intergalactic fugitive–gets a place to crash. You get to curl up in a ventilated sex-box every night while the rest of us are more concerned with the, you know, galaxy-eating weapon locked away in the Cosmic Cola bottle."

"You're just saying that because Pool's upset," I turned to the windshield. "I know you see some sense in this, that's why you're on the fence." In the distance, a roiling mass of powder blue dust washed over a smattering of nanoplanets. The Blue Wave nebula. "And, for the record, your module could be a sex-box too if you just made a move, already."

"Sage wisdom from the Earl of Loverland," Cad snapped.

"You know it," I sneered, "and there's more where that came from."

We chewed in silence for several too-long avins before Pool marched across the cockpit. Planting themself in their seat to my left, and making a big point of not looking over their shoulder at Cad. "Captain," they nodded.

"Translation Officer," I replied.

The atmosphere was as thick as cometcow milk. A buttery spread I wished someone would just slather across a piece of toast, already, and take a bite of.

I decided to break it as Ush glided into their seat. A black blur, coat drawn around her. Black hair frazzled and flying everywhere–not like Ush at all. She hadn't slept. No, none of them had. Because of the black hole. "I'm sorry," I said. "*Drununica*, okay? It's not fair to talk like I'm just your Captain, when I'm really your friend."

Ush swivelled in their seat. Smoothed her coat. "I'm sorry, too. I was more than out-of-line with some of that stuff…It's just…frustrating to feel like things only fall apart when we rely on our feelings. Everyone's pairing off, and where does that leave me?" Ush's voice broke, and that made everyone swivel. Ush *never* cried. "I've never been anyone's favorite person, I *know* I never will be, it's just a lot to get used to."

"Hey, whoa," I soothed. "One: Love doesn't have to be hierarchical. I can care about everyone equally, even if I'm being more *physically* intimate with someone else. And, Two: I'm not going, anywhere, Ush."

"None of us are," Cad nodded. "Not even after, uh…"

"You should say it, Nelson," Pool cut in. "That *is* something Ush was right about. It only exacerbates the situation to act like none of us know what's going on, here. I don't intend to leave, either, but if we're going to keep living together, we should all be more honest about how we're feeling. It would cut down on, er, *emotional outbursts*."

"You mean 'violent,'" I corrected. Still seething over the slap.

"I'm sorry, okay?" Pool's six eyes closed in a rolling wave of blinks. Their scales shifting with the air-flow inside the craft. "Cad, I'm sorry you had to hear my feelings first from Ush. And, Sable, I'm sorry I hit your girlfriend. It's just–" Tears slid between the divets in Pool's fine face scales. Adding a watery shimmer to the bronzed shine. "None of you could possibly understand the way I feel about what's happened to my kind."

"You keep saying that," Ush cut in, "but I don't think it's true, Pool. Not completely."

"Ush–" I hissed. What? Was she *trying* to evoke another strong reaction.

"I mean it," Ush went on. "Yeah, it was hundreds of yushes ago, but, back on Earth, people who look like how *we* do didn't exactly have it easy. Slavery, segregation, red-lining, *genocide*. You're not the only one who hurts, you know?"

"She's right," Cad added, "Grievers are only Grievers because we're not allowed to go home. We may not have known it was your father that–"

"My cymar," Pool grumbled. "Not my father, or mother, my *cymar*. My layer."

"It's sick that your own cymar would turn their hotshot on you," said Cad.

"Actually," said Pool. "it wasn't all that surprising. When I was young, after hatching, during my *churlestrawl*–uh, my childhood travels–I sought them out. It was embarrassing for them. Kaleidizens are supposed to take pride in learning about the universe on their own, with no hand-holding. Mistakes are a mark of pride, it means you tried and failed, but you still tried."

"In human culture," said Ush. "That's known as neglect."

"Well, Pool made it very clear to me that *we are not humans*," said Pool. "There's only so much to see in Open Space. There's lively spots, sure, but a lot of it is just dark matter. I had too much time to think, got really into watching human television shows. Two curious kids, a father to give you advice, a mother to hold you and tell you everything will be all right."

"Sitcoms," I said. "They were considered a special privilege viewing back in the Academy."

Pool nodded. "Sitcoms," they confirmed. "I sought out my cymar. There were certain episodes where long-lost relatives would reunite. A guest star would feature. The audience would clap and 'aww.' All Pool did was glare down at me, and hand me a shovel. They said it would be our first bonding activity. That I would help them dig a lava well for the local Kaleids. Four feet, five feet, six, ten, twelve, fifteen… When we were 'deep enough,' Pool used a ladder to climb out. And pulled it up after them."

"Yuh Zuh," Cad exclaimed in a thin whisper, as if praying.

"There was no god with me when I spent eight aurons climbing out," said Pool. "I was just a child, barely four feet tall, if that. I thought, it must be some mistake. But when I approached Pool, they only sneered at me. '*Now, you are a Kaleidizen,*' they said. *'Now get out of my sight.*'"

Sheesh, and I thought an anonymous soup of DNA made for a dark origin.

Cad was the first to speak up, “I may not be banished, but I *do* understand having shitty parents. My own mother abandoned me on Tauceti when I was just out of Thuro-Bildwin Middle. That’s why everyone on this craft is so important to me, including you, Pool. *So* important. I–I’m sorry if I ever–I didn’t know about Kemi–”

“DON’T!” Pool thrashed the dashboard, pushing away to swivel in their chair toward Cadbury. “Don’t say her name, *please*. I didn’t mean to shut myself off, I *really* care about you, Cad, but I just need time.”

Cad nodded. “I understand. I won’t bring her up,” he said. “Let’s just forget about yesterwash, and move on. A message came in, and a good customer, too.” He stroked his stubble. “Actually, a lot of good customers…”

I pulled the message deck up on the visojecter. A blue-tinted screen flashing out of the glowing blue dot embedded in the control panel. He was right, a who’s who of our most reliable, most obnoxious, and most risky customers had bombarded the shared visomail inbox. There was a backlog of twenty-five messages. “Did we…launch a new ad campaign or something?” I asked, clicking through the little library. “Like overnight?”

“You know what they say,” said Ush. “You make a splash, and everyone else gets wet.”

“Trust me,” Cad scowled at one name on the screen. “No one’s getting wet for Marshall Boners.” Cad’s ex-boyfriend.

Boners–who swore his last name was pronounced ‘Bonners’--was worse than a maroon. Redsuits had organization on their side, practiced, strategic striking. Marshall was an orangesuit, the suit dye painstakingly ground from the rarest aumbrex roots recessed beneath the thorn-riddled, worm-infested trees out in the Peripherals. Bucking every law against gambling the Colonies had ever tried to bind him in. This took a group of ever-present hotshot-toting lackeys

known as the Bonemen to maintain, all clustered around the Lucky-Eleven casino on Pisces-Eleven. A planet coated in pink sand, that had started out with pale white beaches.

Where we suggested clients not screw us over, he ensured that they wouldn't. Assigning his goons to stake out clients, scour every word of personal information given, and not given. Boners dealt in information as his form of contraband, tips for fixed DustDisc matches, known drop-points for dollar deliveries to Colony banks… What he could verify, he used to enrich the lives of everyone on Pisces Eleven. What he couldn't, he sent the Bonemen to seal up, so as to leave no trace for the No-Knocks to come sniffing around.

Thorough, ruthless, and, according to Cad, a supremely selfish lover. Hence our long absence from the little pink planet.

Cad clicked on the message. A video of Boners in his most extravagant velvet robe flickered to life. The raider's grizzled voice humming out of the speaker on the dashboard. "*Ahoy, Kylix Crew. Been a while since we caught up. I've got enough friends around the galaxy to know you're in a tough spot, could use a place to dock, collect yourselves. Away from prying eyes. This could be arranged easily if you swing on by the Luck. Think of it as a favor for old time's sake, eh Nelson?*"

Cad blushed as the video paused, and the messaged ended. "He's got some real nerve thinking I'd fall for that."

"You think it's a set-up?" I asked, scrolling through more messages. I clicked on *Stef Margerine*. A customer we'd delivered to twice or so before, one Ush had spent a considerable amount of time pouring over astro-physiological theories with during our drops. Her message could've passed as a replay of the previous: "*Hi Kylixers! I haven't picked up in a while, been thinking of trying some of the blueberry stuff. I heard something went down out in the Open, let*

*me know if you need a place to dock for a few days. Have some time to collect yourselves without worrying about fuel. It could be like a favor for old time's sake, eh Ush?*"

"Creepy," said Ush. "They're coached."

Pool nodded, "Compromised."

"Still," said Ush as Pool handed her a tissue. The Doctor wiped her face. "Boners' the most connected guy in the universe, he'll know someone neutral to take the Blunder off our hands."

"*SHHH!*" Cad hushed, spittle spraying across the room with such force that Ush activated her helmet. "Don't say it out loud, we should call it the…." He tapped his chin, the faint tune of an electric guitar solo floating up from the radio. "The Boogie Woogie."

Ush produced a napkin from her labcoat that she used to wipe Nelson's spittle from her helmet surface. "It's not going to go super-critical just because we mention it by name, Nelson."

"Not to mention," said Pool, rolling all six of their eyes, "it's a bit diminishing to reduce a weapon of galactic destruction to a reference to funk music."

"Haven't you ever heard of *jinxing*?" Cad shot back. "Luck is fickle, better not to poke the beast."

"You know, they've got you humans pegged wrong," said Pool. "In University, I was always led to believe, in time, you'd get *easier* to understand."

Tendon's chittering approached. The little crowcat scrambling up Ush's leg to beg for a steel biscuit, sitting up in her lap. "Me more!" he squawked. "Feed more!" She rooted around in the drawers for a cube-shaped ingot. Slipped one to Tendon's grasping claws.

Tendon mewled its thanks, licked one of Ush's cheeks, and scuttled off toward the hall.

"Parasite," Cad called after it, and we all shared a laugh for what felt like the first in centuries. The lighter mood wasn't broken, even, when Antiope came yawning out of the corridor. Rubbing her eyes and looking and smelling very much like we'd been fucking just aurons before.

Her suit was wrinkled and only half-way zipped, sliding off her shoulders as she leaned over to stroke the wild splay of feathers sticking up on Tendon's head.

He clicked his beak, cocking his head as his long black tail flicked in the air a moment. Fixing one black eye on Antiope's. Finally, Tendon blinked, and snapped at Ant's forehead. Pecking a shallow, pink scratch above her eyes as he screamed, "MORE! Inside more!"

Ant waved him aside as he lunged at her, giggling, and Tendon lost interest, slithering down the corridor and out of sight.

I dusted the loose feathers off of her suit as she strode to my chair. Leaning down to kiss my neck. "I didn't know you guys had a pet."

"We don't," Ush said. "Tendon's more like an extortionist."

Ant chuckled, sitting across my knees. The act drew attention to how she'd donned her spacesuit–garishly gold away from the milky silver plating of the Dragoon ship she'd resided in the last year–and I hadn't. In fact, I'd forgotten to put on a shirt.

I was grateful, then, to be too dark-skinned to noticeably blush. To think, the Captain in their powder blue boxers. To think, the heiress on the runaway's lap. To think, all that loving last night after all our silly shyness two years ago.

My groin ached, but I'd never been so happy to hobble off to the med bay for an ice pack.

Not now, though. Now, there was just Ant's soft lips grazing my ear. Her fingers playing across my horns. The beer-like draw of her new breath. Sure, we hadn't cleaned up, yet, but the bacteria that grew from Antiope Adams was more than fine with me.

"Waiting on *your* orders, Captain," Pool piped up.

"Oh, right," I cleared my throat. "Yeah, yeah, right, let's get the wash started. Uh, *thank you*, Translations Officer."

Every time someone new moved aboard, there was the matter of assigning their seat. I was the Captain, this was *my* responsibility. And, although the spot at my right hand had experienced its share of fussing over, that was where the First Mate sat. And Cad, for now, forever, was my First Mate. Ant couldn't change that. A Captain and their girl were close, but a Captain and their First Mate were closer. "Next to Nelson should do. Cad, do you mind?"

Cadbury grumbled, "For her highness? Why not?"

Ant took the seat beside him. Stretching along the cracked blue leather. "I have dozens of maps, do you—"

I nodded. "You can load them into the visojecter. Just…don't judge the search history. It, uh, gets lonely when you're not here."

"No judgement," Ant blushed, clicking the visojecter to life and pretending not to read the search history as she erased it. "We can start fresh, no problem. New history, new mission, new name," she mused. "Antiope Sable…Where'd you pick up that name, anyway?"

"Wolfthrop employee registry," I said. "Hannigan Sable, he was the library attendant in Scout school." The only employee who had ever referred to me by my true name.

Because of my “off-days”--Washes-long bouts of depression that left me unable to attend piloting courses due to my tear-blurred vision–the library became a sort of silent sanctum away from my competitive classmates and harsh instructors.

Sable was a devoted Adamist. Gentle, graying, and just past middle-aged, the Griever was recruited as part of the Phoenix Order. Sable was dark-skinned, unlike the rest of the instructors, and looked down upon by staff and students alike because of the nature of his assigned domain. To be fair, in the Colonies, books must be approved by dozens of government officials before publication. Swept for swear words, mentions of sex, mentions of violence, and ‘historical accuracy.’ What was left behind after the butchery was a husk.

Not every book was a Colony-washed ghost of itself, though. Some were just written that way, to adhere to and reinforce the standards set by the government. Every other book in the library another volume of *Colony Conflict*, the most popular series in the Colonies. Styled in the form of a debate series, with residents writing in with vaguely treasonous questions to be set straight by the author.

I spent octavers surrounded by such tomes as *Colony Conflict: Doing Your Part Through Reproduction* and *Colony Conflict: The Widespread Issue of Kaleidizen Cannibalism*. The roundabout explanations inside were dry and desperate for agreement. The social contract of the Colonies required two signers. This dedication to portraying one view with no true, reasonable acknowledgement of opposition disturbed me in a way I hadn’t been able to name until the librarian pointed it out, after I asked him why all the books were boring. “*Because they’re propaganda*.”

It was my introduction to the word, though I wouldn’t really grasp the meaning for yushes, til the initiation invasion.

"It's easier to gain access to restricted areas when you've got a name on hand as an excuse," I said. "'Sable sent me.' I haven't seen him in yushes, but it's the first thing I remembered when I introduced myself to Cad."

This, I'd done over that purple hammer he kept on his hip. Wrestling with him to convince the mechanic I needed the engine out of the ship he was working under. Cad had installed it, after some convincing.

Except, then, I'd used a different first name. "XG-J 2151," I'd said. "Xenogene Sable."

Cad's advice had endured to this wash. "Drop the 'Xeno,' keep the 'Gene.'" It'd been his idea, too, to tinker with the spelling. Borrowing that J from my birth-order designation. In that way, Cad had helped me become me.

"Antiope Sable?" Cadbury shot me a hard and concerned look. "Captain, am I missing something?"

Right. "It wasn't exactly planned," I said. "I mean, we haven't made any arrangements, but I know some things. Terrans exchange rings, right? And I've heard about rice factoring in, somehow…"

"Slow down," Ush urged.

"Rings?" said Pool.

"Human custom," said Cad, robotically. "Some cultures exchange them, like a way to flag that you're mated." He chewed on this a moment, turning to me. "Jean's engaged, it means they're going to be married."

Ant squealed, "Ant Sable…Antiope Sable…Sable." She tasted the name, the future.

"Moving kind of fast," Ush muttered.

"Oh, here we go!" I said because this was what everything had been coming to all along. If humans were slaves to their impulses, Xenos were ten-fold. Ush had her pedestal above it all, untouched by desire or impulsivity. And I had my mess below. "It only seems that way because Grievers don't marry," I pointed out. "It's been over a yush, and we love each other."

"And you've spent most of that yush in orbit," Ush shot back, just like I knew she would. Though her tone simmered into her real-talk mode: "That last name is a back-up plan, Adams. Once you two sign the paperwork, everyone will know, and *no one* is going to like it."

"You don't know that," Cad cut in. "Things have changed a lot, even just in our lifetimes. Humans, xenos, Kaleids, Octils…I've seen so many inter-kind families in Open Space."

"And *never* in Inner Space," Ush confirmed. "The Colonies don't tolerate the things we do. Aries is the Colonies incarnate."

"Aries won't have a choice but to accept us," I said. "Marriage makes a family, as far as Terrans believe. It's the first thing we'll do with the drokens. The permit and the wedding, all in the same wash, the same auron–" My thoughts were racing. Antiope strode to the pilot's seat to stroke my horns. Tracing the curves of the hard black cartilege. I shivered.

"Relax," she soothed. "It'll work out, I just know it." Ant fiddled with the sputtering, staticy radio embedded in the dashboard. Twisted the end dials until the *Disco and Funk* channel faded into chatter: "--*The Kepleran Councilman has gone back on every running promise for the last decade–*" A different voice, mottled by poor reception on their cell line. Callcast. "*Better the Griever you know than the Terran you don't–*" Back to the original caller. "*If you can even call him a Griever after all the shit he's pulled–*" The line disconnected abruptly, both calls dropping as the host cleared her throat. "*Looks like we lost the signal, maybe the both of you will calm down a bit before we come back to you in twenty. Remember, your call must originate from an*

*encrypted server! This is Farer Fera coming at you live following Councilman Cadbury's appearance at People's Pipe, and brief, but controversial, speech. Caller number five, you're on the air. What are your grievances with the Councilman's language?*"

"Councilman *Cadbury*?" Ush looked to Nelson.

"It's a common name on Kepler," Cad plucked a dirty rag from that leather toolbelt to swipe across his sweaty forehead. "Adams, you listen to this hot garbage?"

"SHHH," Antiope shushed him, twisted the middle dial clockwise just a smidge. She glanced at the clock on the dash. "Every day, they call at the same time. If I could just hear their voice…"

The Caller's line crackled. They launched into monotonous reciting: "*Norma, eight, five, sixty-seven, nine, three…Remember, Aystat Epticalskat!*"

Antiope hurriedly retrieved a notepad from the gray cranny coin. Scribbled the coordinates furiously. "These are the only numbers they ever repeat…" Now, I understood. This was her tipster, the stranger who had snitched on the Kaleidizens, and exposed Ant's friend's death and–in a roundabout way–the Blunder lab. "I've been reading lots of Olivia Crest–"

"You mentioned," I sighed.

"--And, according to her Spymaster's Manifesto, every good movement needs a neutral, encrypted reporting firm. The numbers, they're coordinates, but maybe something in the inflection could tell me who's reciting them, and why. As for the sign-off, it's typical of redsuits. *Rat* latin, get it? 'Stay Skeptical!' Great Griever, Crest is a *genius*." Drool spilled from one corner of Ant's pretty mouth.

On one hand, it was kind of exciting to see her so worked up over someone, even it they weren't me. But Crest was something of a sore spot. Not that I cared about being Terrex's top

priority, I didn't want to be, but Olivia Crest was above even me when it came to targets of Aries' wrath.

The ex-Constable had gone rogue three yushes ago, abandoning her post and taking to Inner Space to repent for all the planet-dominating by shrinking into the shadows, for once. Crest didn't stay silent, though. Blowing the whistle on a secretive mining operation on Ross Ninety-Eight, Colony prisoners forced to harvest streaker for slave wages.

"What would Crest know?" I grumbled. "She's just some guilt-driven leaker."

"Exactly," Ant said, slipping her notepad into the cranny. "She's got nothing to lose, and everything to gain from spilling the Colony's secrets. A total badass."

"How many riots did she 'subdue' while she was a Constable?" I said. "With that stunstick? With her hotshot?"

"How many has Adams?" Ush cut in, and Antiope blushed.

"Lay off, Lugomir," Cad clapped a hand on my shoulder. "I'm happy for you, Jean. *Really*. That's why we just want you to be safe."

I stood so he could wrap his arms around me. "I love you, Cad." Cad's hugs had a grounding effect unmatched, even, by actually landing. Cad's steady, steel grip. I looked over his shoulder, at Ush and Pool. Motioned for them to join us. "*All of you*." They squished in, all of us holding each other in a circle, closing Ant out. I opened it, extending a hand to the Constable. "*And* I love, Ant, too."

Pool grimaced as Antiope took my hand, and squeezed into our circle. "I'm gathering that," said the Translation Officer. Nostrils flaring as they sighed. "If you trust her, Jean, then so do I." They stepped back from the hug. "But we need to lay down some ground rules."

"My thoughts, exactly," Ush nodded. "Some boundaries. Like, for instance, no sex in the common areas. That goes for any kind: Digital, oral, cyber…"

"Aren't digital and cyber the same thing?" said Cad.

"Questions like that, First Mate," said Ush, "are why we haven't needed these rules until now."

I fought back laughter as I came to Cad's defense, "Give Nelson a break, Ush, we haven't needed these rules because we're all considerate shipmates. Of course I enjoy the…well…*special affection* me and Ant share, but that doesn't mean I'm going to throw my crew's needs out the airlock. There is no Kylix without each of us."

"There's no Kylix without Cad," Pool pointed out. "There's nothing Nelson can't replace."

"That's just it," I replied. "Each of you is a part *no one* could replace." I looked to Ush. "And I wouldn't even if I could. I'm in love with Antiope, *and* I'm in love with this crew."

Doctor Lugomir blushed. "I concur," she said. "Now, if it gets any warmer or fuzzier in here we'll have a critical mold infestation. Let's move on to logistics, Captain. What does Adams bring to the table, other than her glowing personality and a ten-ton name?"

Ant gaped, straightening in her seat and letting a shade of that Constable formality creep into her tone when she said, "*Pardon me,* Compeer? I graduated top of my class from the finest institution in the entire galaxy."

"Yeah, sure, whatever," Pool snorted from their seat. "I just mean that you should do your best to stay out of the way. I understand we're all getting to know each other, here, but, when it comes down to it, you're just some Colony College grad who's father gave her the first and only job she's ever had. An immature brewer, a novice farer–"

"Hey, I can get along just fine in space," Ant protested.

"Maybe you can," said Pool. "But you wouldn't know. Daddy's always stationed you out of the way. Promoted you out of danger's way. That shield is gone, now, *yukkack*."

Cad nodded, grunting. "They're right. You're in Open Space, our territory. Just stick with us when things get hairy, and don't try to negotiate over us. We know how to haggle, we know what we're doing."

Ant clicked on the visojecter. "Got it," she said. "Stick to what I'm good at." Held a map over the blue scanner. The blinking blue light on the dashboard washed over the image, spitting it back out in holographic form. A map of the Milky Way. "I'll chart a course, if you set a location."

"What do you think, First Mate, Cadbury?" I nodded at the expanse of space before us.

Cadbury inspected the holographic map leaping out of the visojector. Blinking red dots springing up to signal where in the galaxy our most recent messages had come from. He clicked on a red dot hovering near Jupiter, the name that expanded out of it: *Fenton Hendrix*. Hendrix was no maroon, no Griever, even. His message lacked the structure and urgency of the previous two, of any that we'd chanced a listen til then. His pale face sweeping in and out of view as he fumbled with his cellphone, slurring into the mic: "*Kylix crew! I'm throwing a party in the usual place, and we could use some refreshments. Got any of the garlic batch left? Oh, or what about that–*"

In his excitement, Fenton dropped his phone, and the video blinked back into the dash. "Callisto," said Cadbury. "If Boners knows everyone, then Hendrix knows everyone else."

"A little risky," I considered, "but it's a residential area. Terrans don't run patrols on themselves, after all."

"I'd say let's get rid of the Blunder, and get on with our lives, but…" Cadbury adjusted the efficiency controls of the antiox tank.

"But?" I prompted.

"It's only fifteen planetons," he said. "We'll make it, but our ion belt could use a replacement if we want to make the most of the Undergal crystals. Your, uh, escape was very fashionable Captain, but all that weaving really strained the machinery."

"Excellent attention to detail, First Mate," I noted. "Fent's got Colony cash, right?"

Pool nodded. "Hush money, more like. Half in drokens, half in dollars." They scowled. "He's sort of flaky though.

An adellite detected us, rotating the cosmocraft three times to declare that we were leaving the Condor Quadrant. Ant chimed in, "If he's a Colony agent, he might be able to help me get at my portadeposit box. I left the key back in my ship, but I do have my Envoy ID, still."

"Won't it be under your father's name, though?" I asked.

Antiope huffed, "I'm an adult, Jean, despite what everyone in the galaxy thinks, I don't let my Dad pay for me to coast through life. That's blood money. My Constable wages went straight into my mouth most of the time, but I managed to save some for…Well, when I met you, I figured I might need cushion for when I left my post. No more than ten thousand, but an ion belt should only be a couple thousand dollars."

"*ONLY*?" I said.

"We need drokens, though," Cad said. "Trust me, the only belts worth shelling out five hundred for are droken bought. Octilaidizen weaving. Practically indestructible, unlike this Colony-sewn thing."

"Well," Ant hesitated. "I don't have clearance for that. Taking out money is one thing, but the ID'll be flagged if I try to convert. According to Liv Crest, anyway."

"Anyone would convert for a doctor," Ush flashed their League of Galactic Healers ID. The metal card imprinted with her face, the signature of the Lord of Galactic Healers, and an iridescent symbol–two snakes coiled around a staff. The words: "Do no harm" inscribed under their tails.

"Quick-thinking, Crew," I said. "I know this is kind of a meteor in the trajectory, but we'll get through it like we always do–" At the shift from Idle to Thrust, the Kylix rocketed forward. Lurching, at first, like an injured locustrat, before bounding across the black field. "Together."

## CHAPTER THREE

Jupiter's moons had long been settled, though each had a different designation as far as Grievers were concerned. Europa was where the sprawling bars and shopping centers were located. As well as public bathrooms for anyone passing through. Gannymede hosted a thriving community of the elderly, older folks who had long ago traded away their ships and crafts for the bubbled, artificial atmosphere there. Its fresh supply of oxygen, and regular visitors, family and otherwise.

Then there was Callisto. Where the oxygen only flowed indoors, so just forgetting to close a door could result in coming home to your grave, had you prematurely deactivated your helmet. Unlike the bubble-shaped homes within the giant dome on Gannymede, Callisto was dotted with cities. Quintuple-layered glass apartment buildings, with flowers withering in boxes at the windows, and round enclosures around the balconies for pale humans to smoke streakSticks. Exhaling green smoke–like emerald dust–that drove their cats to slinking indoors.

While Europa and Gannymede sustained populations that were either wealthy enough to fuel up often, or so thoroughly retired they withdrew entirely to the home, Callisto had a cylindrical, metal tube chugging along the moon's orbit. A sling.

These were only present on the busiest galactic bodies, but slings weren't Colony funded. Terrex wouldn't dream of it, given so many of the most powerful Terran scions belonged to families with monopolies on ion mining. So each trip was a drok a pop, and it was rocky as fuck.

The sling acted as sort of a slingshot, drawing back around a moon or planet while vessels seeking to escape the gravitational pull of a planet without burning through too much fuel. Not much at all. The force of the approaching sling shooting the waiting ships out like arrows into the cosmos.

The Department of Space had only bothered to colonize planets that could host a reliable, consistently-replenished oxygen supply. That is, oxygen introduced at a regular rate would overtake the atmosphere, shift the composition to make it more habitable for humans, and less habitable for anyone already living there.

These planets only included one from the original Solar System: Earth. There was also: Wolfthrop, Luyten, Proxtauri, Kepler, Teegarden, Gliese, Trisp, Tauceti, Kayto, Lochusk, Toisev, and, most recently, Kaysev–the home of the Oozers my class of star-scouts had wiped out for human settlement.

A planet's proximity to Earth meant nothing in regards to how much Terrans cared about the wellbeing of those on it, only its status as a member of the United Colonies. This carried the same weight as a giant brand in the countryside reading NATURAL RESOURCES HERE.

There was always an angle with the Colonies. Sure, they framed Earth as some miraculous one-time occurrence– a democratic society of equal people with the freedom of speech, arms, and to pursuit of pleasure–simply seeking to grant these rights to other beings, oppressed under the thumb of their government run by their own. They needed *humans*–galactic heroes, be they–to topple their civilization and rebuilt it in their image. Upright, nearly hairless, with two eyes, two ears, and only one set of genitals marking them as one of two recognized sexes. But the real reason for any of the invasions was the *land*, not the people.

Land is rich wherever you go in the galaxy: Rubber, lithium, oil, and gold all asleep beneath the habitations of people more interested in the water and wildlife. The Colonies were anything but rich. There was a debt crisis every six months or so, settled somewhere on Earth in a place called Washington D.C. with a bunch of handshakes and promises only to postpone addressing it. Earth had taken decades to recover from being baked into a humid half-desert after

a few companies and billions of humans dumped greenhouse gases into the air as easily as Grievers dumped old tailpipes into craters. Evicting most of the planet only sped the process up by a tiny fracton. The factories and farms out in space had been a lifeline for Terrex, still were. Even *more so*, given the more recent expansions.

Though there were only thirteen colonies, so far, there was an endless number of Vassals. Unofficial human settlements that received almost no support from the Colonies, but were still subject to the rules it enforced. Xenomy Codes, Universal Decency Decree, and Bill of Galactic Homo Sapien Consitition. All laying out tax laws, trade mandates, and the rights of humans walking amongst the stars.

Callisto was one such settlement. And close to Earth, too. Far enough for inhabitants to feel they were sticking it to the Man, close enough to run back to the safety of the Man when things got too scary off the old blue ball.

I brought us in easy on the northern most region, Hephaestus City. Famed for the steel sculptures of Aries on display at the center of Central Park. In front of Mayor Vizeck's mansion, there was one such rendering of the dragoon that had established the city decades ago. Three humans–a captain, a medic, a First Mate. But not their pilot, the Xeno excluded but named in smallprint on the pedestal.

The walls and dashboard of the main cabin was washed in golden shafts of light. Light, and *heat*.

I released the steering wheel for a moment to open my palms to the warmth. Something cold and urgent crying out at the base of my brain like a marble that had lodged there in my infancy.

The source of the light crept into view as I circled the glass spire known as the Blue Moon Manor apartment building: A white-gold star, ablaze and uncaring. Shedding heat and light as easily as it shed radiation.

I knew this star as Domum Ra, every Griever did. Though the Terran scientists referred to it more often by their own name, Sol Prozima. The citizens of Earth and the Colonies had a more colloquial name for the star. The Sun.

I'd only lain eyes on the big, real, gold deal a few times, less than five. Whatever it was about it, I didn't know. My body understood, though, this was no purple, green, or gasping red star. The black fur along my tail raised to attention. So noticeably that Ant ran her closed hand along the length of it to flatten the display.

"Are you okay?" she said. Though she, herself, didn't look away from the window. Straining through the screen of rocky litter, the asteroid belt clustered around Mars. Though this wasn't her target. That was just past that, a green-blue glimmer. Earth, seeming so small for the domino at the front of the Terrex empire. Though, I supposed that was just because I had never seen it up close.

"Yeah," I said. "Of course." Though my voice was unconvincing even to my own ears.

My eyes drifted to Mars proper, orange-red and only sporting a spattering of dwellings. The Mars Project–as Terrex history books referred to it–had been a resounding failure for the higher-ups running the Colonies. No matter how much you pumped money, personnel, and plants into the desert, the native ecosystem always swallowed up any installed environments. The rampant mining hadn't produced any water, oil, or even interesting tidbits about the history of the planet. It had always been barren, and it always would be.

The two gray moons orbiting it, misshapen and more ovular than spherical, had more traffic than any another planet in sight. Parking structures with sleek green, blue, and gray ships throwing Domum Ra's light across the solar system. A cluster of residences, these domed, oxygenated and transparent. Then, on each moon, gold, glass space-scrapers taller than any building in the universe.

The Martian Consulate Complexes. On Phobos, the North one. Then, on Deimos, the South.

A hotspot for diplomatic talks, business mergings, Terran historical tours, and other yawn-worthy Colony bullshit shunted off to the AM radio channels.

I finished one more circuit around the Blue Moon Manor before managing to find a parking spot in one of the docking bays.

Inside, Terrans lined the corridor, helmets deactivated.

I followed suit. The crew followed my lead.

"When we get in," I said, "take a deep breath." Who knew how long it would be until we got to taste crisp, fresh oxygen again.

"Especially you, Cad," Pool added as he deployed the wheels so we could glide into a parking spot.

We hung back in the Kylix a moment in the murky, steel lot, searching the throngs of chattering people before one burst through to wave us down. A human. Pale and Terran, clad in a black mesh pullover over a blue-green-pink frankensuit. With high-high pink boots, and a spotted magmabadger scarf.

"Sorry," said Fenton Hendrix, huffing as he peered down our hatch into the cockpit. "You kind of caught me in the middle of a small soiree." A gaggle of swaying Terrans hooted at Fenton as they staggered in line to their ship.

Each of us sank down in our seats. I shuttered the windows to keep out prying eyes. The last thing we needed was someone bugging out over seeing a Kaleidizen. "Come inside, you're drawing attention to us!"

"Jeez, testy much," but Fenton complied, shutting the hatch above him and pulling faces at the state of the interior. "Copper and silver *touching*? Well, they say tacky is in, now, so who am I to judge?"

"Yeah *who are you*, really?" Ush said, catching my gaze and holding it. "I just mean, are we really trusting a Terran in a spotted scarf with *this* kind of information?"

"Fenton's cool, Ush," Pool insisted. "We go way back, graduated in the same class at Uranus U." As if that proved anything.

I didn't fault Ush their apprehension. We hadn't seen Fenton in four octavers, and he seemed to tweak his appearance with each run-in. It didn't help that we kept meeting him at his costume parties. The last of which he'd left us at, tending to *his* apartment while he bailed to go on a hot date.

The vomit situation was so bad, Cad had a Cyano attack at just the sight of the floor in the morning.

"If this is about that six-pack, I'm a little confused," Fenton admitted. "But, if this is about secrets, I'm quite adept at holding on to those." Fenton produced a cell phone. Plugged it into a small radio on his belt, like the ones we were wearing but with an antennae. He turned

three dials, and chatter burst out in a staticy, layered shout. Words folding over each other, all in Kaleidizen.

"The neural network," I said.

"This is the Kaleidio," said Hendrix. "Kaleidizen-Sensitive Extragalaxiary Radio." Nelson eyed it with an enthusiasm he usually reserved for engines, but Fenton gazed upon the radio with a touch of nostalgia glazing his eyes. "Little invention of mine and Pool's. The last thing we worked on together back at Uranus U. A Communications Degree and the clearance of a Colony propagandist can take you a lot farther than you think."

"Propagandist?" Pool snorted. "Don't you mean 'Public Relations Agent?'"

"I'm retired, they can't do anything to me." Fenton slid the phone and radio into his pockets.

"Retired?" said Ant. "You can't be more than thirty."

"Thirty-two, but you flatter me," Fenton batted his eyelashes. "They cycle through us fast so we never know too much, grant us a pension for life so we don't complain." He shrugged.

"But, aren't you, you know…?" Cad said. "Gay? I mean, how did you get such a high position in the Colonies?"

"How did either of you?" Fenton shot back. "Pool, you were considered for the role of 'Ambassador' at one point. Jean, you went to intensive Colony-funded pilot school. Don't even get me started on your connections, Constable. I stayed in the closet, kept talk of my social life out of the office. Aries may be gay, himself, but he doesn't smile upon flamboyance. I didn't visit any gay bars, wear any rainbows–" He looked pointedly at Cad's suit, brightly stained with multi-colored tie-dye. "Still don't, actually. Severance package comes in installations, after all. I don't complain. I've got a place to live, and I've got friends."

Impatient ones, at that. Calling out, "*We know you're in there, Hendrix!*" The Kylix, at once, began to rock back and forth.

"Should we take this meeting inside?" said Ush. "Before they shake the engine loose?"

"Here's the thing, this was kind of a reunion," Hendrix explained. "Old work buddies, gotta maintain those crucial connections somehow, eh. These are Terrans that don't really *get* Open Space culture, you know." He was stammering. Dried his hands on his mesh suit. "My point is, you'll have to play the part. *Standard* crew."

"Gee, Hendrix," Ush sneered. "Could've mentioned that on the way up."

"It's fine," Pool twisted the dial of their watch. "I've got an Easer." Their form shimmered, collapsed into that of a bronze-skinned human. The same color as their scales. The spikes had receded to patches of hair, their three slits of a nose blooming into a round, cartilage based protrusion. They looked at me. "Oh, right. Sorry, Jean."

Ant squeezed my hand. "Constables travel with their pilots all the time," she said. "Keep it casual, and they won't suspect a thing."

"Casual," I repeated. "Got it, uh, Captain Adams."

We followed Fenton to the elevator at the end of the lot. On the way, he threw his arms around the drunks in their stained golden suits. Kissed their cheeks, kissed more than a few on their mouths. We waited for the Terrans on the platform to stagger off before we boarded. Hendrix pressed the button for the Ninth floor as the rattley metal doors drew closed.

The doors opened unto a steel grate blocking us off from Fenton's loft. The floors steel, and the walls metal layered with brick. Crushed orange stone, from Mars, maybe. The couches were upholstered in neon tarps. Bright blue, green, purple, and pink. The guests, of which there were hundreds, wore even more striking colors.

Brown and clear-stained bottles broken, and intact, and overturned on the floor. The green smoke signifying Streaker smoking was present, curling up to the ceiling, dancing with the chandeliers. That sweet, syrupy smell washing over us as Fent fiddled with the lock attached to the grate. I followed Cad's gaze to the seated masses around a metal coffee table in one corner of the living room. Some were smoking streaksticks, the flaky, processed, pre-packaged version of the drug that resulted in just a mild high. But others using the titanium banding of their phones to crush the pure crystal.

Streaker in its unprocessed form was the most potent, and the most deadly. The green stones harvested from a cave on Trisp's only moon were ultrastrong, capable of sending experienced users into washes-long benders fueled by complete hallucination and euphoria. In the worst cases, dehydration and psychosis. Long-term users of all types, though, developed glittery green flecks in their irises, and were more susceptible to developing Cyano Sickness. Caused by the plant bacteria found on Trisp that fed on the oxygen in the host's lungs.

Cad said, "It's hard to breathe in here."

"Ah, right, sorry, Nelson," Fenton wrenched the rusted doors aside, pointed far past the mustard-yellow shag carpet. "Feel free to go out on the balcony, but don't let anyone follow you out. I don't want my neighbors to complain about the noise."

"Too late for that," Ush muttered, though her eyes lingered on a woman shaking dice around the kitchen counter. She threw them and, when she grinned to announce the numbers, was missing more teeth than not. The name of the game came to mind, then: Two, Teeth, Ten. I'd never played, but Ush–a legendary gambler in her life before she'd taken her oaths at the League of Galactic Healers–had filled in my gaps of knowledge.

The way it went was simple, rudimentary. Anyone feeling lucky could stroll up to take a turn at the dice. If you rolled a two, you picked two cards, and compared hands with others at the table for a shot at a small sack of winnings. If you rolled a ten, much larger winnings were introduced. As for any other number, well, that was when payment was rendered, rather than rewarded. The cost of wasting the dicemaster's time: A tooth.

"Terran rules are so convoluted," Ush tsked, shaking her head. "Even their games are stacked unfairly."

We stepped out into the party. Tried to wait around for Fenton, but he kept bouncing from conversation to conversation. Party game to make-out sesh. At last, he waved us away. "Give me an hour, and I'll meet you by the bathroom. It's the quietest place in the house."

So we dispersed. Ush melting into a smattering of Medics, who happened to be standing near the gambling action. Cad's hammer attracting tipsy mechanics that admired his arms and tools. Pool and Ant stuck by me, for a moment, but Antiope whispered, "We've got to mingle. There *must* be a teleteller here, somewhere. If a drunk one." She linked arms with Pool, nodding at a pair of laughing xenos by the pink punch bowl on the marble counter. A printed label taped to the bowl read '*Xenos Only.*' This, I knew, was to avoid having to label the other one '*Humans Only*.'

Normal didn't need to be labelled, it was implied.

"I orbit you," Ant said. "I'll see you in the bathroom later."

"Yeah," I waved. "See ya…" I slunk off to the punch bowl as she was engulfed in a cacophony of flashes. Cell cameras going off as the party-goers strained for a clear shot of a real Adams. A low, guttural bleat rumbled out of me as I reached for the metal ladle, but was interrupted.

"XG-A," said the xenogene holding it. They handed me a tin cup. Filled it. "2145."

"Jean," I said. "I mean, Jay. XG-J 2151."

We sniffed each other's ears. A xeno custom. The ears usually held the most smells and information, given not tons of people scrubbed behind them. A collection of dust, skin flakes, and sweat. Sweat was the real ticket, like a precious harddrive of info. From this exchange, I could tell XG-A had recently visited a sand-rich planet with salt-water oceans, and an acidic atmosphere. Maybe Harrieta, or even– "Brahe," I said.

"I never miss brunch," XG-A rubbed their belly, drool dripping down their own pinky-length sabers. Shorter than the rest of ours, around them, but their antlers were the largest I'd ever seen. Not like my own curled black horns, but softer, white, and fuzzy, but still strong and firm. This proved true when a goldsuit paused their conversation to hang a thick coat from the longest antler before walking away. "Nor does my Captain."

I sniffed the contents of the cup, tipping it, but was careful not to drink. The crew and I did our drinking together, always, and always on the Kylix. The scent was pleasant enough: Bubblegum flavored, mixed with a hint of some kind of citrus juice. Orange, or lemon.

The other xenos sported an assortment of whiskers, claws, and wet, black noses. Only one other than me had a tail. Not slender, black, and long, but bushy, brown, and wagging.

I watched them as they finished replying to a raving xeno. Their conversation-mate throwing their arms around with their eyes so wide I was inclined to believe they'd been experimenting with streaker, if not for the lack of green flecks. "*I'm telling you, she says they had a black tail, whiskers, black ears–I didn't ask about the eyes, but I bet she'd say they had that, too. It was I, the* real *I. I'd bet any amount of it, my whole quarterly pay!*"

The listener's face seemed familiar. Bushy brown brows and cropped hair to match the fur of their tail. Two short horns, a small, dull one, than a sharp, long one just below it, nearly attached. Both jutting out of the center of their forehead. Both dipping as they nodded along. "*I'm sure she saw what she saw, I just know it wasn't them. Other xenos have similar traits, XG-O. Everyone knows I died aboard the pod–*"

XG-O cut in, "*That's what they* want *you to think*!"

"*Who's* they*?*"

It didn't take much consideration to figure out they were talking about XG-I. Aries hadn't gotten away with the skirmishes with just a hit to his reputation. He'd enacted the attacks commanding the first few classes of graduated xenos–The first xenos ever created. But an attack was one thing, genocide was one thing, too. Galacticide was another, entirely.

A year after the original Blunder, in 2146, the first xeno riot had taken place. Just a one-person riot, really. XG-I 2127 had taken their Terran Captain hostage to negotiate a space aboard an automated grain delivery pod destined for the Caniscen.

It was common knowledge that the Colonies had sent one that was programmed to self destruct along the way. Scattering their black fur amidst the cosmos. This was why the legend–in Scout Academy–had taken on the name of XG-Infinity. Forever a reminder of why we had to stay in line, and why–no matter how clever we considered ourselves–the Colonies were hundreds of steps ahead of us. After all, they had made us. Of course they could destroy us.

The listener addressed me, jabbing me with an elbow and shaking me from my reverie of my Academy days. "Don't need to sniff those big ears to recognize the esteemed rebel, XG-Motherfucking-J," XG-L 2149 said.

Recognition ignited in my mind. Yes, their hair was shorter, but their scent was unmistakable. Heady, with a hint of blackbark. We'd met yushes ago, not long after my escape from Wolfthrop. They weren't on the run like me, but an established star-naught, with all the fear and glory that came with the career. Vacationing on Europa. Couldn't entice them to desert with me, but I did entice them to show me their bed. "What do you mean, L," I said. "I followed the same orders you did back on Sev."

XG-L studied my face. "Right, right," they said. "I just mean how you never punched out on time, soaking up extra hours. Save some pay for the rest of us." They winked.

I grinned, touched my cup to theirs. "To overtime!"

All the xenos laughed, this was hardly the first toast of the night. Everyone was quite drunk enough to reek of liquor and barley, some partygoers pungent with the scent of piss.

XG-F 2150, a xeno with triangular ears tufted with fur, was the jolliest of the drunks. Throwing loud barbs at their Captain over shift management fouls, and singing along to the pop songs blaring from the speakers. It was them who mentioned the strongest notes wafting off of me. "I don't see any mate in sight, but you smell like you've been butting horns with someone all night, if you know what I mean." They nudged XG-A, who shrunk away, still sore over XG-F spilling their drink on them, staining their suit.

"Everyone knows what you mean, F," XG-L rolled their eyes, but blushed faintly. "You're just imagining things, wishful thinking. *If you know what I mean*."

At his, the little group of xenos lost it, slapping their knees and roaring with laughter.

XG-P, a xeno with retractable claws, piped up, "The statements don't have to contradict: F hasn't *docked* anywhere meaningful in months, and XG-J smells like sex." They poked me,

though this didn't bother me as much as it would be with a Terran. "*Exhausting* sex, from the reek of it. So, who's the lucky, musky xeno?"

Shit. I could almost forget about the rules regarding xeno-human relations out in space, away from Colonies, and Vassals, and judgemental eyes and minds. I'd only been with another xeno the one time on Europa. The rest of the time…Well…There was Landred the Octilavian, that'd been after a concert on Titan, aboard their cosmocraft. Then, of course, Antiope.

"Anybody know XG-J 2153?" A flurry of head shaking. Whew. "They're one dynamite lay, that's all I'll say of it."

"Doesn't it get confusing, though?" XG-F spoke, yet again. "Since you have the same designations?"

"Well," sweat cooled on my brow. I swiped it away. "We didn't do much talking." A beat. "If you know what I mean."

Another raucous roar of sputtering, tear-lined laughter.

"So, J, what's your business on Callisto?" asked XG-L, when the bout had simmered.

"Looking for someone who can handle a conversion," I said. "Our Medic needs specialty supplies. You know the deal, drokens only."

"We've got a Verifier aboard the Cosmocraft Harmony," L said. "Just needs to see some ID, and you're good to go."

"That would be perfect!" My tail grazed theirs, I jerked it away, but L played with it for a moment. Stroked the soft black fur. Was I ever glad my tail wasn't as sensitive as my horns. I wondered what Ant would say, if she were nearby. Would she be jealous, snatch my tail away? Or, like she had with her family, just keep it casual? Play the part? "Any way we can repay you?"

L shook their head, withdrawing their hand so my tail floated to the floor. “Just meet us in the dock-lot in fifty axons. That’s when the Captain wants to get going, early start tomorrow. You know how it is.”

“Sure,” I said. “I know how it is.”

There’s never any need for a fabulous bathroom. In space, with silicone compactSacks drawn to conform to the body of each user, and metal-plated communal tube rooms for all our toileting and showering needs–stars help anyone who mixed up a wastetube and a water spigot extension–everything was clean, wipable surfaces, no fuss or additions. Fenton’s bathroom, with its shaggy pink rugs, gold, elegant shower curtain, and stone statues, screamed excess.

The busts were of President Brandon Jackson–a distant relative of Andrew Jackson’s and a close personal friend of Aries–and the man himself. Tamer of Space, Aries Adams. Carved from the whitest porcelain. Not unlike the toilet, done up in a fuzzy lid-cover, just across from it.

Fenton stumbled into the bathroom with breath hot and thick with the scent of liquor, and lipstick dotting his suit. Smoothing his brown, curly, buoyant hair, which sprang back to a bouncy pile on his head, anyway. “So, what’s the big fuss, Kylix crew?” He tripped over Ush’s foot to land ass-first in the hollow, metal tub, snickering.

Antiope felt around her pockets. Sliding out a black coin that resembled a droken, but was too shiny to truly pass for an antimatter coin. She reached inside it, her enter hand eclipsing into the cranny. Drawing out the silver suitcase. Slow-like, she undid the latches. “Just don’t jump to conclusions, Hendrix.”

Fenton didn't blink at the bottled black hole, nestled in the foam inside. "Only one to jump to, anyway," said the Terran. "Revenge. It's Kaleidizen, don't bother to deny. Takes years to brew something like this, only they'd be dedicated enough–"

"We're not the only ones who'd want to use it, though," Pool asserted.

Fenton chuckled. "That thing's good, almost forgot we had an extraterrestrial guest."

"We're in trouble, Fent," Pool said. "Need to get this thing off our hands, and not for free."

Hendrix patted his pockets, came up with a tin box of streaksticks. Lit one, tucked the box away. That sweet, green smoke. Stinging my eyes, but also drawing me in. "I know a guy, but he's not exactly in the quadrant. Well, he's not exactly a 'he.' Or a 'guy.' Or a 'person.' But they're–*it's*–something. *Someone*."

"Start making sense, Hendrix," Cad spat, "or my hammer-hand *will* start itching."

"So testy," Fenton threw up his hands. "Just…listen." He drew the radio out of his pocket, again. Linked it with that little wire to his cell phone. Again, that layered chatter, blaring out of the speakers before he turned the dials. "I've actually been meaning to reach out, Vy-Kaleidizen. My translations are rough, I know, but I'm sure you'll find it easier to understand them."

Fenton stopped turning the dials as a shrill, high song blasted out of the speakers. Just as quickly diving to a deeper register, again and again like a hand coming down to stab at my eardrums. Shriek, boom. Shriek, boom. Shriek, boom.

"Enough!" I clapped my hands over my ears, tried to fold them down, close out the noise. "Turn it down! Turn it off!"

Ant put an arm around me. "Fuck, Fenton, what the hell are you doing to them?"

"Nothing–" Fenton shut the radio off. "It's–"

"A high-frequency distance call," Pool completed. "Interferrence like that only occurs when the call is from outside the galaxy." Their spikes shivered. "Even despite the wavelength-stretching, the words are plenty clear: *Have you come with a donation*?"

Fenton shrugged. "It's all they talk about. Well, that and–" Hendrix gingerly switched the volume on. The hushed, grainy transmission resuming to recount a series of numbers: "*Norma, eight, five, sixty-seven, nine, three…*"

Antiope gasped, slapping her suit pockets until she reached into one and drew out her notepad. "I recognize those coordinates! They're the same from CallCast, my tipster and this…this *thing* must be linked, somehow."

"That *thing* has a name," Fenton said. "Well, I gave him one. I call him 'Whaletail,' cuz it sounds like…you know those deep-ocean recordings? Like a song that never ends…I've been listening to it for months, even talking back. Or, trying my best to."

"Sea-mammal was never your strongsuit," Pool said. "If I remember correctly, it was Bonobo."

Fenton spoke in gibberish, then. Something chirpy that totally flew over my head. Pool replied, and they chuckled. Flicked tears from their eyes. "Good times back at the University. Haven't thought about those days in forever." He pulled a small tablet out of his pocket. Swiped through a gallery of photo albums labelled "2167," "2168," "2169." Fenton mused, "I think I still have a picture from Kemi's twentieth. Remember, she convinced those dolphins to stage a mutiny at the Colony Aquarium–"

"Don't," Pool said, as Fenton trained his thumb on the "2169" folder at the edge of the screen. "I–I'm not ready."

Fenton opened a notepad app, instead. “Of course, it *has* been a short few years.” He showed an especially scribbly screen to Pool. Markings dashing words out of existence, editing them, the middles, roots, suffixes. “They’re collectors…Librarians, really. Kind of like if Kaleidizens protected Andromeda’s knowledge instead of its people.”

“These are just theories, though, Fent,” Pool scrolled through the notes. “I mean, no one’s ever even seen a Further.”

“Duh,” said Fenton. “We’ve already concluded the call is coming from a great distance. No one’s ever seen one because they’re *further* away.”

“Librarians?” I said. “We need someone who’ll make the trip worth our while, and then some, Hendrix.”

“There are only anecdotes floating around Inner Space,” said Fenton, “but they always end with the Furthers paying out *big time*. Money is *not* an issue for them. Shit, my friend Tiana’s friend Brittany’s cousin showed up with a suitcase of *at least* six-hundred thousand–”

I swiped at the drool oozing down the corner of my mouth. “Dollars?”

Fenton shook his head, “Drokens.”

My tail jolted to attention. This would cover my debt and more. More than more. “We’ve got ourself a buyer.”

Ush heaved herself down from the sink counter. “Hold on, so we’re going to put all our drokens on the *conspiracy theory*?”

Antiope said, “I don’t get it. Who’s the Further?”

“The Furthers,” corrected Pool. “The stories describe humans getting calls from them since the Atom Bomb was invented. They’re…preservationists. Peaceful, friendly, but elusive. The only way anyone’s been able to verify their existence is comparing their sound frequencies

to those of undersea mammals on Earth. Maybe some way distant relative, or just admirers of the language, I don't know, but they're chatty. Chatty, and hungry for knowledge. Plans, culture, art, even weapons. Maybe especially those."

"Yeah, and, minor hiccup," said Ush. "They're *not real*."

"Are to," said Fenton.

"Are not," said Ush.

"Then how am I friends with them?" said Fenton.

"Further proof of their non-existence," Ush said. "Everyone, I want to get rid of this thing more than the next Griever, but we can't chase shooting stars. They're just rocks."

"Rocks don't talk," snarled Pool. "Not everyone feels comfortable exposing themselves to humanity in a universe where entire galaxies can be destroyed if they don't get with the program and roll over for the Colonies."

"Speaking of rolling over for the Colonies," I said. "I've got a tip on a verified teleteller."

"That's all well and good, Captain," said Ush, "but is this new belt even going to be enough to drag the craft to the edge of the Galaxy?"

"Not even close," answered Cad, easily. "We'd need a galiton drive for that. There are only, like, thirty in existence. They're high-tech, ceramic core for maximum crystal liquificaction–"

"In Grievelish, First Mate?" I said.

Cad swiped at the drool dribbling down his chin. "We'll need the ionic belt if we want a chance at finding someone with a galiton, and if we want to keep this hunk of junk chugging along without a serious fuel mishap. It's worth replacing, Captain."

"Then that's what we'll do," I confirmed, as my ears twitched.

Antiope noticed, first, frowning. “What is it?”

It took the partygoers a moment to notice, too. Hooting along to the latest track, a discordant chorus of drunks. So loud, it was avins before anyone noticed the absence of a backing track. “The music,” I said. “It stopped.”

Fenton scrambled up from the tub, Pool supporting one arm, Cad the other.

“Where does that leave us, then?” Ush hissed in the confused, muddled hush that fell over the entire apartment.

“We’ll figure everything else out,” whispered Cad. “For now, though, we need to move–”

“--And toward the Furthers’ is the best direction,” I said, and in the way it goes with a Captain’s word when the shit was about to splatter, it was so.

There was a horde of waiting bathroom patrons. The dazed guests parted for the crew plus Fenton to wade through into the living room. “Who the hell touched my Taurus Twenty-One Stereo system?” Fenton threw accusing glances around, expecting the culprit to have scampered off to a corner by now, but he was, in fact, still present at the scene of the crime: Marshall Boners lounging across the couch to fiddle with the dozens of dial. *Timbre, Pitch, Bass…*

The Prince of the Pisces-Eleven wore his signature silken suit, bright orange and falling around him as delicately as insect webbing. His bone-carved, sterling white crown situated on his head so as not to disturb his delicately braided, black hair. I had to give him this, his complexion was brilliant. Creamy brown, lighter than Me and Cad, but the same color as Ush and Antiope. Boners was blemish free, sporting a new, well-trained triangle of a beard, and a thick, violet, velvet coat. “Ah, Nelson. I knew you’d go running to a Terran.”

Cadbury's eyes went as wide as a visojector screen. Scanning Boners' for signs of authenticity. "Marshall, what in the galaxy do you think you're doing here?"

"Let's have a little privacy," Boners motioned to the balcony, "can't have enough of that in space."

Cad searched the doorway, then Marshall's belt for a sign of a holster. The Bonemen, with their shaded goggles drawn over their faces at all times, were nowhere in sight. Nor was Marshall's golden hotshot. "I don't know…"

A flash went off somewhere within the bathroom line. Antiope tried to shield her face with her hand. Fenton hustled out of his spotted scarf, though, and draped it over her.

"The balcony, then," said Fenton. "If it'll get you out of my house sooner rather than later."

As one, we poured onto the balcony. A spacious semi-circle with iron bannisters running along the perimeter. Before shutting the door door behind him, Fenton adjusted the volume of the stereo, once more, turning it all the way up.

Marshall extended a hand to Antiope. Instinctively, I stepped in front of her. Boners giggled. "No introductions, needed, then. I get it. I've widowed enough lovers to recognize a pair of them. Touching to see you settled down, Jean. I was never invited aboard that flying junkheap."

"Because I was happy to leave you behind," Cad spat. "And that's *Captain* Jean, to you. Let's stay on topic, Boners. We're looking to offload something with a little more punch than Kylix Kölsch. We need connections, *loyal* ones. That's why we came to Hendrix, instead of you."

"Where does *your* loyalty lie, Nelson," Marshall said. "I crashed this little get-together because I know you're in a tight spot, and I can offer you an out. Better, I can offer you everything they took and more. I'm talking about Earth, Nelson."

Cad blushed. "Boners–" So this was what Boners was playing at, a last-ditch swing for Cad's heart.

"It's no game. Look, I've secured a deal with a higher-up. Passing the Casino to my right-hand raider. We're phasing out some games, taming the place, maybe adding a daycare…Making it suitable for Terrans."

"You're retiring?" Cad balked. "Business has never been so good."

"And lonely," Boners admitted, with a shy kind of look gracing his grizzled face. For a moment, I could totally see what Cad saw in him. "We always had similar goals. Get the excitement out of the way, then move on to sweet domesticity. Someone to come home to, kiss good-night…Picket fence, kids, maybe a pet for the little ones to adore."

Nelson's face was unreadable. A dreamy look flashing across his eyes. "Funny," he said, at last. "You always shot me down whenever I wanted to talk about anything more than five washes into the future."

"Money changes things," said Boners. "Stable money, in multiple payments. *Dollars,* that's the kind you can support a family on, Nelson. But there'll be drokens, too–for us to have fun with–" Marshall rooted around in his coat pocket. Closing his hand around a plastic-wrapped green brick. Glittering even in the low light of the meeting room. As unmistakeable at a distance as it was up close: Streaker.

Cadbury leapt back as if Boners had whipped out a hotshot, and pointed it directly at him. "What the *fuck* are you doing with that, Marshall?"

"What?" Boners feigned ignorance. "This? Premium Gemini Ninety-Eight, strained and pure. No lacings, no paddings, and most importantly, no connections to Atticus R–"

"Nothing enters Open Space without Atticus R's say-so."

"Except you, and *this*." Boners reared his arm back to chuck the brick of compacted streaker across the balcony. "The most exquisite high you could possibly imagine."

Cad caught it with sure fingers. "What are you–Do you have any idea how much this would cost if you spilled it?"

"Seventy-five thousand dollars," said Boners. "But I knew you wouldn't let it go to waste."

"Don't!" Cad roared, but he gripped the brick tighter than ever. So tightly, I thought the package would up and explode right in his arms. "Don't say that like you know me, Marsh."

"I know what you'd do for a line of green dust," Boners pressed.

"Cad?" Ush piped up. The Doctor watched as drool pooled in the corner of the First Mate's mouth. Dribbled over the clear packaging. The dust so emerald-bright, and the brick so large, Cadbury's eyes shone more green than brown.

"I know you're jonsing, babe," Boners crooned. "So much you'll forgive me when I turn your crew in."

At once, a corner of the balcony shimmered. And a woman appeared.

Now, Nelson did drop the streaker. Though it didn't explode, because of the shorter distance, just bounced a few times before thudding dully at the woman's feet.

She was slightly taller than Antiope, but shared her complexion, and hair color. Though her hair was longer, black and tied back into a neat, stubby ponytail. A sign of a high-ranking Colony official. Her uniform was pristine, golden, without a wrinkle, and without a single empty

spot where a patch could be. While Ant's eyes were black, too, this woman's were pale, murky green, and trained on me as she swept the hotshot she had drawn at the ready across stunned eyes of my breathless crew. "Horns, ears, tail, fangs…Something tells me I've found my rogue xeno."

"Artemis," Antiope breathed. "Art, what the hell are you–?"

"You can promise a Griever anything," Artemis Adams turned the hotshot on Marshall, and fired. "Low intellect, nearly unhuman." Boners' flesh sprayed out from his skull before the bloody bone fragments. Or maybe that was just his crown, and his skull incinerated on the spot. Strips of charred meat clung to our suits, our hair. But no one dared move, as the Constable aimed, again, at me. "Start explaining yourself–"

"Don't," Ant trembled.

"*DEADNAME*," the word was a weapon, itself. Ant gasped as if a dagger were plunged into her chest. I wanted to hold her, but sudden moves were off the menu. I knew what Ant's dead-name was, she'd left her medication or ID out a few times, even showed me, once, how much different she looked on the little square picture imprinted in the corner of the card. I also knew a dead-name wasn't meant to be said aloud. That this was cardinal sin. "Look your little brother in the eye and tell him why you're dragging our family name through the sewer!"

A younger man than I'd seen in yushes shimmered into existence in the far corner of the balcony next to Artemis. Eighteen, nineteen at most. He had shorn Colony-regulation length tightly-wound black curls, gleaming atop his head like an inverse halo. Pale green eyes that matched Artemis'. And an impossibly rigid bone structure for someone with so young a face. The face of Aries Adams.

"Apollo!" Ant gasped, as he raised a hotshot of his own. Heavy duty, like the one aimed at me. But with way less sure of a grip than Artemis. Face sheened in sweat, and his gangly

knees knocking in time with his trembling grasp. “How did you get–Constables younger than twenty-one aren’t allowed to use cloaking or laser technology.”

“We’re obviously on special assignment, lowrank,” Artemis rolled her eyes. “*Private* assignment.”

So that explained the lack of radio buzz about the Undergal. Aries was keeping this a family matter, for now. “What did Dad tell you?”

“That you abandoned your post after some kind of emergency, like a coward,” said Artemis, “and you’re making the family look bad.”

Ever so slightly, Antiope exhaled. He hadn’t mentioned the Blunder, and he hadn’t mentioned our relationship. “It’s complicated…Dad, he wants to stoke tensions…”

“He’s never been the most diplomatic,” Artemis agreed, shrugging. “So what, *Deadname*?” Her expression softened at the same time as her voice. “I don’t know everything, but I know you’ve had to defend yourself against *those kind*. Dad has his reasons, just like you did.”

“Don’t!” Ant’s face flushed a fiery red. “What I had to do and what he *chose* to do couldn’t be more different!” Though she didn’t sound so sure.

“Wait,” Artemis waved the hotshot. “So if you abandoned…Then the xeno isn’t holding you hostage?” She studied all of us, in turn. “How do you know these criminals?”

“You mean…” I said, though I knew better than to complete the sentence aloud. Antiope’s family didn’t know about us. Not her sister, probably not her brother, and definitely not her father.

“We’re friends,” Antiope blurted. “I mean, they’re not so bad if you…”

"If you what," Artemis balked. "Look past all the *crimes*?" She shook her head. "We get it, *Deadname*. You're tolerant, a real bleeding-heart. But these are dangerous street urchins, worthless orbitting dust-gulpers, if they've convinced you they're your friends, you've still got a lot more more training to do before you're ready to lead an Envoy. This is Dad's fault for stationing you on that shithole. He did the same to me when I was your age. It's a test of his, I guess. Making sure the corruption around you doesn't *corrupt* you. You failed, *Deadname*." She steadied the hotshot, taking hold of the handle with two hands. "Move out of the way, he wants this cleaned up and over with."

"Stop!" Antiope took hold of me, hugging my entire body and turning her back on her sister. "I won't allow you to hurt either of them, I mean it, Art."

"Get *away* from that thing," Artemis urged, thrusting an arm out in front of her younger brother. "Look at the size of those teeth!"

"I won't move," Ant insisted. "I won't move, and–and I won't pull a gun on you."

Artemis' dark eyebrows raised as she realized what was happening. She renewed her grip on the hotshot. "I told you to *move, Deadname*."

Just as I gripped Antiope's shoulders to tell her to listen to her sister, Fenton Hendrix threw a small white marble at the balcony floor. "*EYES!*" he shouted.

I clapped my hands over mine. A flash so hot and bright my pupils *still* ached even through my fingers. Then, the icy, white smoke. A stunstone.

When I opened my eyes, Artemis Adams was trapped inside a flickery, holographic cube. Her eyes followed us, but her body did not–could not–move. Behind her, Apollo was frozen in place on the ground, cowering and shielding his eyes. His mouth giving a choked scream before the cube closed over his lips to muffle the noise.

Antiope said, “I’m sorry. I promise to explain later, okay?”

Artemis’ eyes rolled wildly. Though her expression didn’t harden, this did nothing to soften the acid bite of her words: “You really *are* the weakest link.”

“Only by Dad’s metric,” Antiope turned away from her sister as the holocube closed over Artemis’ silent, shouting mouth. “And, for the last time, my name is Antiope.”

The smoke was what drew the partygoers to the door. Pounding and jimmying the handle. “You smoking weed out there, Hendrix?”

“Um…” Fenton glanced down at Marshall’s headless body, still smug, somehow, where it lay crumbled on the balcony floor. “Not yet, I’m not.” Marshall had arranged for his own demise, a runner-up leader installed already, according to him. The Lucky Eleven would live on even if the establisher wouldn’t.

The music was loud enough to have covered up the hotshot noise, and Artemis’ cussing, now. Fenton throwing an old pair of curtains over her, and adding another speaker to his exterior sound system. “I’ll clean up outside before the party winds down.” He rooted around under a lawn chair for two bottles of Bactericlean. “Crapshoot Approved,” was written across the label.

Fenton thrust one bottle into my arms, and busied himself using the other to spray down every splatter of blood surrounding the grisley sight. The viscous gunk ate away at the drying red puddles. “Your boots,” he said.

We began to spray ourselves, watching the blood and cartilege dissolve into a thick beige goo. Wirro would either have a big laugh, or a change of heart about this whole outlaw thing when he heard how his concoction was being used. “When you get downstairs, cool your jets. Don’t race off, it’ll attract more attention than if you’d walk into the living room covered

in…*THAT*. People notice two things at a party, an entrance and an exit. You've got five hours before the box thaws. Enough to put a lot of planetons between you and Callisto."

"She's going to be pissed when she get outs," Ant said. "She'll definitely arrest you."

"I'm a propagandist," shrugged Fenton, with the stark and silly confidence that comes with being a Terran. He showed us to the elevator, "I'll calmly explain that I advertise my parties too well to know everyone who passes through. All I know is a dangerous Adams lookalike showed up waving a hotshot and blasting people's heads off."

I entered the platform last, to make sure everyone was safe and accounted for. My eyes sticking on Cad's hands as he hastened to secure something within his suit. My crew was altogether, so I turned to Fenton as he secured the gate between us. "We won't forget this," I said. "Thanks, Hendrix."

"Don't mention it," Fenton Hendrix winked. "Oh, and don't forget this. You'll need it to contact the Furthers." He shoved the handheld radio with the finger-length antennae through the bars of the gate. "Just do me a favor, all of you."

"Anything," I said, and my ears flicked forward to drink up whatever Hendrix needed.

"The universe is well past its prime, and…well, so am I." A faint but unmistakeable blush touched Fenton's cheeks for the first time since I'd met him.

"You're five yushes older than us," Pool protested.

"Yeah," said Fent. "But I was born on Earth. These space years–*yushes*–they're hard on me. I still can't wake up without a headrush. Look, I'm not the kid I was back at U.U. These parties, they really take a toll the next day. It's catching up with me fast, and I just can't stand to watch you all worry your lives away. I'm not saying don't take your mission seriously, but take

some time to just enjoy yourselves, too. Have *fun*. Everything else, the Colonies can take away from you, but they can never take the memories you make when you're young."

*Fun is a privilege*, I thought, but I said, "We'll take that to heart, Hendrix. Thank you for the thoughtful suggestion."

Hendrix gave a deep bow, bending at the hip with a flourish. "As always, it was a pleasure working with you, Pool."

The Translations Officer feined a curtsy. "And to you as well, Fent."

Fenton stroked his chin. "What is it you Grievers tell each other?"

"Stay dangerous," I sighed. "But we don't need any help with that."

The elevator door shut, and we descended with nothing but the Kaledio and a rough location: The brink of the Caniscen, the edges of the Milky Way. "First Mate, what's the most realistic estimation of the time it would take us to get to Whaletail without a gal-drive?"

After the cramped party in the heated loft, the docking lot seemed especially cold. "Even if we get the best belt, ever," Cad strode off of the platform, toward the ship, "It'll take fifteen washes to get there, at top speed."

"*Fifteen washes*!" I shouted. My voice echoing around the lot so XG-L caught sight of me by the Kylix. Waved the crew over. "This is shaping up to be one long errand."

"You're telling me," Ush muttered. "Just a quick stop on the Undergal, 'in and out.'"

"Okay, I get it," I sighed, urging Antiope to lead us across the garage. "This is the Verifier tip, I mentioned. You should lead the way, *Captain Adams*." I turned to Ush. "Meds Officer Ush, you've got your League ID?"

Ush pulled it from her wallet.

We marched in a line behind Antiope. Only breaking this formation to greet each of our associate officers, standing under their milky silver, polished, giant, idling ship. XG-L's crew stubbing out their streaksticks, and extending their hands.

The Captain was obvious from the number of patches on his wrinkle-free gold suit. With thick, sleek, brown three-inch regulation hair, and gray eyes that seemed to linger on Antiope's chest before he extended his hand to her. "Captain Ren Starling." When she clasped his, though, he didn't shake, but brushed his lips against her knuckles. "I'd say I was charmed to meet an Adams in the flesh, but we've met a handful of times before, my lady." His eyes locked onto her black, bright ones. "Don't worry if you don't recognize me. I doubt I made a significant impression during those dry Political Leadership 103 lectures."

"I wasn't worried," Ant withdrew her hand, wiped the back of it on her suit. "And I don't recognize you, but I do recognize your name from the course roster. Your father, I believe, was also advisor to the Terrex Senate before my father had him escorted off of the Adams Estate last year. George Starling?" Ant produced the cranny. She reached into the black disc, and pulled out a steel cube I'd never seen. A box that was locked with a combination dial. She turned it. Anyone else would've looked away politely, or not registered the letters she spun and held on, but even from my periphery, I could tell the combination was "X-G-J."

Starling used a silken handkerchief to dab at the sweat on his forehead. "Yes, that's him. My father, he's what you'd call old-fashioned. Has a backwards view. He couldn't recognize a woman or an opportunity when they're standing right in front of him." Starling whistled, and his First Mate came trotting. "Dexter, verify these notes, and convert them to drokens, at once."

"Yes, Captain," Dexter reached inside, and pulled out a thick, banded wad of dollar bills. "You have a conversion permit?"

Ush thrust her ID at him. “Doctor Usher Lugomir, G.H.”

Dexter inspected the ID. Front and back, letting it shimmer in the low, fluorescent light of the lot. “I see, Doctor.” He waved a wad at Antiope. “These are organized into…? It’s easier if I program expectations in the conversion-counter.”

“Thousands,” said Ant. “One-thousand dollars per band. For, uh, nine thousand, total.”

“Decent light travelling change,” Starling noted. “Where are you lot off to? The next assignment?”

“Oh, it’s out of the way, actually,” Ush said, fast.

“Was I speaking to you?” said Starling, though he didn’t bother to address her. Looking, instead, to Antiope. “Captain Adams?”

“An exoplanet,” Ant said. “Around the outer-gal.”

“What a coincidence,” said Starling. “We were assigned to oversee a Vassal in the Neolevy quadrant. You know how it is in the Neo, they need a firm hand. A well-bred leader to quell all that uprising nonsense. And I’ve got the best breeding of all.” He chuckled. “Maybe it’s no coincidence at all.”

Ant said, “Oh?”

Starling grinned. “Sure,” he said. “Everyone knows Zach Hatchett has your father’s eye as far as partnerships go. Industrial Steel is versatile, goes far in this galaxy. The Hatchetts have a fabled history, just like the Adams. Clambored up from steerage, blah blah blah. But if Aries really cares about you, he knows you’ll need options, Constable. My father is the head of the Quadronic Council, first cousin to Derrick Hurrenhail. Steel is versatile, but a silver spoon is reliable.”

"You'll have to talk to the First Mate," said Ant. "I'm not interested much in metal-working."

Dexter pulled out a thin black rod, about the length of a pen. He clicked a button on the end of it, and it collapsed into a lap-sized kind of computer. With a slot for dollars, and a chute for drokens. Dexter undid the bands, fed the cash in dollar by dollar. Coins as black as the deepest recesses of space clattered out of the register. A tally counting upward on the tiny screen: Value: *2000 Dollars, 2500 Dollars, 3000 Dollars, 3500 Dollars, 4000 Dollars…*

In total, more dollars went in than resulting drokens. Just a couple hundred. One droken was worth dozens of dollars, so I wasn't that surprised. Turning to Cad. "Is that enough?"

He nodded. "It's the value, not the price. I'll head to the Reeselice Wrench." I handed him the silver key that went into the slot beside the steering wheel. Everyone had had a pair once upon a time, but Cad's had only been the first to disappear. One by one, everyone lost theirs. In a metal panel fixing a leak, on the dancefloor at the Undergal, inside our metal-munching stowaway, Tendon.

"What's that?" said the Terran in the white lab coat. "Repairs?"

"Our ion belt," said Cad.

"Just as well," said Starling. "Go buy the part, then click onto the Harmony. Our ship has a coupling slot."

"Captain," Ant started, "I couldn't ask–"

"I wouldn't offer unless I was positively happy to assist," said Starling. "The Cosmocraft Harmony has a galiton-drive, we'll be at the edge of the Milky Way within six washes, no problem."

"Six…" Ant looked to me. "That *is* less than fifteen…"

"It'll be a snap," Starling snapped, as if to emphasize the point. "I should be commending you for rescuing such a pathetic ship from compaction. It'd be a crime to stand aside while that hunk of junk limps to outer-gal."

Antiope chuckled, nudging me. "My father isn't quite caught up on slang," she said. "I said I wanted a 'sick ride' and he went to the chop-shop. Figured I'd like a fixer-upper project."

"Ha ha," I said, though I couldn't so much as muster a third. Yeah, there was something cruelly funny about the idea of Aries granting us the Kylix.

Through a big, square window on the side of the dockbay, I watched a constellation of cosmocrafts skid along the top of an elevated ring of moon-white rock and glittering crystals. Synchronized, they dove below the surface so the blurred outline of the silver oval above consumed them, one by one. Each blinking into the sea of debris, sending crystals flying out in all directions when they bounced off of the ships. Glowing shards lashing the sturdy dock window like white sparks in the black oblivion. Tapping like skeletal fingers begging to come in.

"It's settled, then," beamed Starling. "Our ships will *connect*, then we can *connect*." The Captain put an arm around Ant. A bah escaped my throat, but I clenched my jaw shut. "Even Apollo is courting on Earth. My family is held in high regard, Antiope. The *Starling Fifty-Five* is considered *old* by our production standards–" He patted the belly of the ship, hovering over us. "The Secretary of Spaces' daughter bumping into a cosmocraft-company heir at a house party…There's a word for that, Adams."

"Coincidence?" Antiope ducked out of his grasp.

"No," said the Captain. "Fate."

## CHAPTER FOUR

Banishment was a Kaleidizen's greatest shame, and Eagre found themself unprepared for the isolation. Cosmopods were independent vehicles, very unlike cosmocrafts. There was room for one person, and room enough for them to be comfortable, too. But no creature born on the ground can truly take comfort in a life confined to orbit.

Kaleidizens didn't have to eat often, nibbling glass at their leisure, and lava when that wasn't available. The latter of which was present in vast quantities throughout the universe. There was more fire than frost. And, Eagre convinced themself despite the warnings present in myths about protoctils, more friends than foes.

Landing on Avelea, a protoctil-adopted planet halfway between the Caniscen and the Andromeda, Eagre was without money, social standing, or understanding of the local language. This wouldn't keep Brull, a metal-working protoctil, from offering them a molten iron rod as comfort food, after witnessing the stranger make a lopsided landing on the small planet.

This would turn out to be a custom on Avelea, protoctils hard-pressed on pleasing the galactic locals, given their new presence. And it was a good thing Brull did, as, after yushes of intent listening to the architectural wonders of the protocol home-planet, Octil-Eight, gaxeons away, there was nothing to show for it on the surface of Avelea.

The world dimpled with holes for as far as the Kaleidizen could see, and barren of plants. Great heaping boulders of cooled magma taking the place of trees, and lakes of boiling rock streaming around the burrows. It would be a yush before Brull would allow a Kaleidizen to enter one of these burrows, so Eagre would come to know them from the top as they made their home. Docking the cosmopod above-land, and settling into a routine with the local.

Whenever the faraway silver star that only brought a faint flicker of heat to the chill planet rose into the dusky skies, Eagre and Brull would begin their lessons. Protoctils had developed a reputation among Kaleidizens for being difficult to work with, partially due to the lengths one would have to go through to learn the language just over half of them spoke. Just over half because of some kind of religious controversy back on Octil-Eight which had set protoctils to relocating in the first place.

Though their language had spread rapidly, the religion had not. The details revolving around an obelisk with nine guidelines to life engraved into it thousands of yushes ago. Most protoctils had committed themselves to the idea of it falling from the stars, ensscripted by unseen forces who knew better. But the protoctils on Avelea believed it was written as a warning to future generations, by proto-protoctils. Beings that inhabited the ancient, complex, sturdy burrows of Octil-Eight before those that lived, now.

This view offended some powerful branch of the government, there, and so Brull and their brethren fled. There had been friction, of course. Some squabbling over their intentions and their presence in the galaxy that Rill and Runnel had smoothed over with diplomacy, treaties, and handshakes. Now, as their culture dictated, with all they came to understand as people rather than threats, the protoctils considered the Kaleidizens a part of their community. An extension of themselves.

It was octavers before Eagre worked up the nerve to break the news to their pleasant companion that the sentiment was not returned. This, however, was plain honesty, something Brull was owed. Something Brull had expressed in not downplaying the extravagance of the palaces belowfoot. Protoctils were quick to adapt, beings who could live without oxygen, as Kaleidizens could, getting what they could out of the barest of atmospheres. Making do.

Brull was *not* devastated. They had figured this may be the case, as protoctils considered it a great offense to greet guests with weapons. Something Eagre had mindlessly done octavers prior, on arrival. Clutching the obsidian bow in one hand, and gripping Brull's with the other.

Eagre's scales rippled, and they sputtered with embarrassment. Brull had come to mean the most to them, in the yush since the banishment. Everything, actually, considering the other protoctils rarely breached surface, preferring their vast, warm cave system.

The Kaleidizen apologized profusely for their mistake, and took their bow in hand, just then. Meaning to make a point of breaking it, or throwing it into a lake of lava, but Brull stayed Eagre's hand.

"It's too beautiful to destroy," Brull said. "*Weapons* are ugly, but yours is not."

Eagre understood what their friend was saying, and followed them when they led the way to a burrow. The hole large, black, and unlit. One's trust was the sole key to navigate the halls below, and Eagre lended this to Brull in heaping supplies. Falling with them until delicate webbing ensared the both of them, guiding them gently to the vast halls of fresh air. The lava pools above gave a radiating heat to the walls. Which were carved with careful markings so feelers in the dark could tell which direction they were walking in.

To this end, Brull led the Kaleidizen through a series of semi-crowded tunnels, into less crowded ones. The way always marked, no one left in the dark, completely. Every now and again, Eagre would bump into kneelers paying respects to replicas of the obelisk back on Octil-Eight. Those values inscribed upon it.

The sparsest cave of all was the last that they came to. Brull explained that this was the Cultural Preservation Cave. There were treasures concealed in the shadows, pieces of a ship that had exploded before reaching Avelea, the separatist document the group had presented to their

dissenters on Octil-Eight, a copy of the peace treaty diplomat Runnel had drawn up to end the spat of violence at the edge of the galaxy.

Because the material was unlike the stone and rock canvas of the underground, and not engraved for reading in the dark, it wasn't until Eagre asked the protoctil to read the treaty above that their worst fears were confirmed: The treaty was only sparingly translated, much of the agreements concealed in Ruwrgr so only a Kaleidizen would know of the deception.

The treaty didn't just grant the escapees from Octil-Eight residence on Avelea, it stripped them of any sense of security in this arrangement. Paragraphs devoted to explaining that this period of residence was at the convenience of any Kaleidizen who happened upon the land, and decided to take it back. This was something the community had not been privy to, and concern abounded when Eagre told Brull to spread the word of the injustice.

Rather than allow the protoctils to risk themselves by confronting the Kaleidizens in a manner that might be construed as provocative of further conflict, Eagre volunteered to right this wrong in person.

"But aren't you banished?" Brull asked their friend.

"Not if I am banished in the eyes of a liar," replied Eagre.

At once, they boarded their cosmopod, and set off for home.

It's a peculiar thing how distance can be folded by the emotions. A boring trip may seem to last eons, but Eagre felt there was lava pooling under their scales. After yushes of judgement, six scornful eyes cast upon their own hatchmate, Runnel was the scoundrel.

*Scoundrel, lying scoundrel*, Eagre thought to themself. The thought as steady as their two heartbeats. Thump: *Scoundrel*. Thump: *Liar*.

For washes the cosmopod hurtled toward Clutchsterl, and for washes the Kaleidizen stewed.

When the planet was within sight, glittering prettily despite Eagre's foul mood, they knew immediately what had to be done to shatter the veneer of perfection. To snap their fellow Kaleidizens out of their false superiority, bring their reality down to the reality of their rotten spirit.

Eagre was so focused, when the cosmopod docked, and they excited the vehicle, they were too distracted to remember others would be shocked at their presence. Banishment was no temporary affair for Kaleidizens, then there would be no point. It wouldn't carry any weight as a sentence.

Upon word of the arrival, the leaders of the community–including Rill, Tide, and Flood–rushed to meet Eagre. Standing still and with six watchful eyes cast upon the community that had cast them out. They didn't move, didn't answer any accusation or question, until Runnel stepped through the crowd. And, then, it was to nock an arrow, drawing back as they aimed their obsidian bow.

"What are you doing here, you criminal?" Runnel shouted across to them.

"That word is relative," said Eagre. They loosed the arrow, and it pierced through one of Runnel's eyes. Clean through their head, coming to a stop when the tip pierced through the back of the Kaleidizen's skull.

Ren Starling lingered in the Kylix's cockpit for so long, one could've mistaken him for furniture after a while. Pool groaned each time he stood, just to sit again. Talk–no, *drone*–on, about his

achievements, what his patches meant, how he'd earned them, his run-ins with Aries, how impressive he was in real life.

"You should flirt with *him* then," I growled through my teeth.

"Huh?" He looked up as Ush poured him another cup of spiced tea.

"Goat got their tongue," Cad said.

Starling shrugged, inspecting the aisles of the corridor leading out of the cockpit. Pausing under Pool's sleepmodule. The hatch closed off, but stray scales still-stuck to the wall they grazed every morning leaping down to the floor. "It seems a bit of rebellion runs in your blood," Starling pressed one bronze scale into Antiope's palm. "No need to explain yourself, every Envoy has a run-in with those glittering lizards, eventually–"

"Kaleidizens don't share any DNA with Earth reptiles," Ush said.

"Maybe not," shrugged Starling, "They *are* more like locustrats. One moves in, then you've got a whole Colony just like *that*." He snapped his fingers, motioning to the black abyss glaring at us through the nearest window. "Just think, there's only so much space for humans, only so much oxygen, *water*. They can live anywhere, but they choose to encroach on our good, golden land." Starling saluted, grinning madly at the stars in the distance. "I'm not so much a watchdog as a gardener, you see? Those two-tongued things are like weeds, choking off all the nutrients. If we've any hope of getting rid of the infection, we've got to tear them out at the root."

Pool shifted in their seat. "It's been really great having you, and we appreciate the lift, but we really should start turning in for bed."

Starling said, "And who are you, again?"

Fuck. Pool kept it cool. "Paul," they said. "Paul Kirkman, the translator."

"Well, Paul," Starling sniffed. "I believe it is the Captain that dismisses guests. Unless she'd rather join me for a nightcap upstairs?" He pointed to the ceiling. "We've got something a little stronger than tea on the Harmony."

"Wow, that sounds tempting," Ant gave a huge, exaggerated yawn. "But I'd be sorry company. I'm exhausted, Captain. Maybe, uh, tomorrow?"

Starling caved at this tenuous promise. Climbing directly through our hatch onto the Harmony. Cad slammed the hatch shut behind him. Pulling the lever that activated the lock, and slathering on an extra coat of muting-glaze for extra measure.

Pool twisted the dial of the Easer on their wrist. Their spikes erupted from their forearms and shoulders. Bronze skin glittering over to scales. The human nose deflated to the three slits. "Man, it's hard to keep up that act."

"Yeah," I said. "For some of us, anyway…"

Everyone but Antiope gathered around. Hands out for their beverage of choice as I pulled the sideways lever under the steering wheel. A little metal door popped up, disrupting the metal floor next to the Captain's seat. Chilly air wafted out. We didn't have a cooler, but we had long ago found a way to use the shitty floor insulation to our advantage. Let the expanse of space cool our beverages for us.

For Cad, a root beer. Not just any root beer, but Brahe Brand. Less sugar than other varieties, and way more ginger. For Pool, a bottled Martian Mule–vodka, hot sauce, and, for some reason, tapioca pearls. For Ush and I, two cool, amber bottles of Kylix Kölsch. Our own brewed beer, courtesy of a small barley collection Ush kept fermenting in her lab. The label was hand-written, Ush's neat script. A list of ingredients–Barley, hops, water, yeast, honey,

coriander, lemon juice, a sliver of green onion juice– and, in smaller font: *10% alcohol and it tastes like it, too*.

I twisted the cap off one batch, extended it to Antiope. “Do you still drink, or did meeting me put you off for good?”

She took it. Swigged. Grimaced. “What the–?”

“It’s got a wee bit of onion juice just to keep you on your toes,” Ush explained. “Pool’s idea. The gimmick is the only reason we’re still in business.”

“To successful experiments!” Pool held up their bottle. We all clinked bottles, glass chiming ringing over the room. “And being rid of that guy.”

Cad put his hands up, as if shielding light from his eyes. “Well, we *would* be screwed without him.” His face puckered as if he were chewing on a lemon wedge. “No one’s saying they’re not grateful–”

“I am,” Pool shrugged.

“He’s just doing his job,” said Ant. “It’s nice enough of him to give us a ride.”

“He’s only doing it to get close to you!” I didn’t suppress the annoyance in my tone.

“What about you and XG-L?” Ant picked at the label on her beer. Peeling it up in long curls of paper. “The way they look at you,” she said, “like they’re hungry. I don’t like it.”

“They’re just an old friend,” I insisted. “Let’s just focus on the pros: We’re officially off the clock, *and* ahead of schedule! Starling *did* give us that, even if he’s so full of shit, it’d be a favor to tear him a new asshole.”

“*Jean*!” Ant said.

“Speaking of shit,” said Cad. “After this whole Boners situation, should we assume Terrex is tipped off?”

"Yeah, about that," Usher cut in. "Help me add this up: Unless someone onboard said something to Boners about the black hole, how would he know to ring the fuzz?"

"The fuzz rang *him*," Ant clarified. "It's standard ally-poaching procedure. Offer them cash in exchange for information leading to the capture of the fugitive."

"Yes," Ush mused, "but Boners must've been *confident* we had something big up our sleeves if he randomly decided to wager his entire position and Casino for a last-ditch hook-up with Cad. Selling everyone out and everything off."

"Well," shrugged Pool. "He wouldn't have to know, anyone instructing him from the Colonies could've been in the know… somehow." They lowered their voice, two pairs of eyes darting upward to the hatch coupling us to the Harmony. "There've been no reports of panicking back on Earth, Terrans would be the *most* panicked if there was even the suggestion of a Kaleid-brewed Blunder."

"Okay, okay," Ush waved. "But *how* would the Colonies know? Artemis didn't mention it, and an intergalactic weapon ranks above a ship-thief, even a Xeno one."

I hadn't considered this. "She doesn't know anything," I said. "I mean, not to insult your sister, but she seemed clueless. Like she really thinks you just got scared off from your post." And blasting someone's head off at a Terran party was in no way Constable protocol, even if it came down to the kidnapping of someone from the Five Families.

"Clueless doesn't even begin to describe her if she still hasn't figured out I'm a girl," sighed Ant. After avoiding looking at, not to mention touching, her at the party, it was nice to be able to reach out and hold her.

Cad puffed on his inhaler once. Twice. A third time. "I always knew Boners was a bag of wind, but… all that *blood*…"

"He brought that on himself," I said.

Cad scoffed. "The same way all those Terrans back on the Undergal brought *that* on themselves? Just by being there that night?" He shook his head. "No matter how bad a person someone is, they don't deserve to suffer. We're just people–not Almighty Yuh Zuh–just flesh and bone and….so much *blood*." Nelson didn't attempt to hold back the tears spilling from his eyes. "Who are we to decide who lives and dies? Who is *anyone*?"

"Ask the Colonies, not me," Pool put their metal arm over Cad's shoulders. They squeezed him. Kissed his cheek as they clinked cans.

"Here, here," Cad's tears spilled into his root beer, but he chugged it all the same. Maybe more heartily. "I'll tell you this, though, that ship is a real beauty. I got wet just brushing up against it. Such refined steel, sturdy craftsmanship…" Cad shuddered.

Maybe it was the alcohol–though I wasn't sure how Kaleidizen biology processed it, the speed, or potency–but Pool stunned everyone when they said, "You flirt more directly with a ship than with me."

Cad flushed a deep purple, short-circuiting in his swivel chair while everyone exclaimed some version of "*FINALLY*."

Ush said, "Jean, Adams, let's leave these two alone while Doctor Vy-Kaleidizen extracts a confession from the local mechanic."

"Deal," I said. "Now that's what I call a *sterile environment*. Eh, Ush?"

Usher rewarded this pun with a groan. "You would know, Captain," she teased.

Cad's eyes pleaded for someone to stay. For a reason to drag this out any longer. I lowered my voice to give him some parting words of encouragement: "Seriously, Nelson. *Rip off the bandage*. They're obviously into you."

Cad nodded, gulping.

Pool waved, taking the seat beside Cad, but we climbed into our sleepmodule and shut the hatch before a word was sad.

The module wasn't any less roomy than usual, but felt so much smaller since Ren Starling had entered the picture with his *Starling Fifty-Five*. Maybe the enclosed size wouldn't be so much of a bad thing, though. I mean, it was nice to, at last, be close and alone with Antiope.

"So…" she said. "How long have your crewmates *liked* each other?"

"For forever," I replied, rolling over to kiss her shoulder. My tail playing along her calf, her thighs. Ant shivered, settling onto her back to give me access to her throat. "You know how it is, some things just take a little time to develop."

"Like the hickie you're giving me," Ant gently urged me off of her.

"I'll be careful," I said.

"You don't get them so you don't know how easy it is to," Ant insisted.

"*Fine*," I drew back. "Since you're *so* worried Captain Starling will know you're engaged–"

"It's better he think he has a chance," said Antiope. "I'd know. I did have *some* dating experience before you, you know?"

"Okay, okay…" I soothed, running my hands along the cool skin of her midriff. Thick curls of black hair cropped up at her navel, and I stuck my tongue inside. "Do you get hickies *here*?"

Ant laughed. "No, I get *ticklish* there. You know that…"

"I think I forgot." My mouth found hers. "Remind me, Ant."

Antiope Adams would go down in the history books as the universe's best kisser. Ant's tongue hot and wet on my lips, sliding against my own. In and out. Each renewed stroke a pulse of pleasure, just those little beginning tendrils. Emanating from my groin. "Not tonight, Jean."

I studied her face. "Sorry, I didn't mean to make you upset."

"It's not you, it's Starling," Ant groaned, turning over to clutch her black metal cellphone. "Pool's right, I don't like him. I've seen enough of his type at Colony College: Entitled. Can't take no for an answer. I hate having to rely on him, but, for now, we just need to play our parts." On the screen of the phone, Antiope pored over every detail of a home movie. Grainy and flat–a video, not a hologram. A warm, deep voice rumbling out of the speakers: "*He's not an 'it,' Artemis. He's called a brother. Say 'hello.'*"

I lingered on Ant's word choice, though: *Play our parts*. "Artemis had no idea we were dating," I said. "I get that. I'm Jean Sable, and you're Antiope Adams. But, if your name was anything else–If you were Plain Jane and I was just XG-J 2151, I worry you'd still keep me a secret."

"*Jean*," her tone was hurt, but soothing. Soft.

"It hurts me that you're losing touch with your family," I said. "I know that's *because* of me, and that it's your choice, but seeing them in person todrain made everything seem so much more…*alive*." This choice of word bounced around my head for a moment when I remembered Davenon. The young Griever recruit aboard Ant's initial dragoon. The dead guy that had started this all.

And, at first, because he had reminded Ant so much of her brother. I thought back to Apollo, cowering, young, pale and completely out of his depth.

Then there was his sister, Artemis.

"That being said," I said. "I won't act like it doesn't also hurt me to see how you still love these people that wave guns in my crews' face."

"It's not so simple, Jay."

"Don't call me 'simple,' Ant," the bite in my tone was unmissable. I took a breath, had to roll back whatever was building. "It's just that…All I want is to be with you, but no matter what I do or how I change, it'll never be enough for your family. It's not who I am, it'll always be *what*. You don't know what it's like for everyone to always expect the worst from you."

"You don't know what's it's like for everyone to always expect you to be perfect!" Antiope sat up on her elbows, crushing a button along the sides of the phone to blacken the screen and end the video. "A perfect son, a perfect Adams, a perfect, normal, handsome young man just like Aries. I even *look* just like him." She buried her face in her hands, and heaved deeply. Tears dribbling through her tight, trembling fingers.

"Ant?" I rubbed her back. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said anything–You don't look anything like Aries."

She snapped up to show me her flushed, tear-streaked face. "Get real, Jean."

"I *am* being real," I said. Of all the living Adams, only Athena's grown son–Counselor Atlas–stuck out, with hair so pale it didn't even match that of his father's. Aries hadn't been so willing to gamble with those sneaky attributes one's ancestors pass down, those of one's spouse. Utilizing the same technology that had brought him–and later, the xenos–into existence, Aries produced three children with no other parent to speak of. Antiope's DNA was entirely Aries, not so much a chip off the old block as a stunning replica. Unlike her siblings, though, with their pale green eyes, only Antiope had inherited his deep black ones. "You are *nothing* like him. Starling would fit in more with that rich snot than you."

This made her smile, wiping at her own shimmering oozing snot. I handed her an old undershirt to blow her nose into. “That’s what I like about Grievers,” said Ant. “You see the in-between, instead of just the this-or-that. Friend, family. Stealing, borrowing. Man, woman. Ally, enemy…Things are easy to categorize in the Colonies: Humans, good. Kaleidizens, enemy. Xenos, pilots. Octils, engineers. Everything is stringent and practical, even our lives get labelled and filed away. When we get married, it’s always for some benefit, love isn’t enough of an ulterior motive. There’s *breeding* to consider. Exchange of genetic test results, a private investigator set on unearthing every detail of someone’s past before a formal proposal is drawn up detailing the ways your families and business prospects will flourish if you join your houses…So far the only person to pass Dad’s screening is Zach Hatchett of Hatchett Industrial Bracing. Art married his cousin just last year, they’ve been trying for a baby for months–”

“Gross,” I couldn’t imagine why *anyone* would deliberately try to have a baby. Not just in this kind of universe, but in general. Especially on the birthing side of things. Who volunteered to labor for hours just to strain out an eight-pound bag of shit, tears, and responsibility. To think, Artemis Adams, with her hard, cold glare and robotic voice as a mother.

Then again, her tone had softened so much when she addressed Ant.

Antiope went on, snapping me out of that train of thought, “–Aunt Athena married his Uncle…Even Apollo is courting his sister. Dad and Hatchett Sr. have been chaperoning their dates for years.”

“I see,” I said, and I did. Zach Hatchett Jr’s smarmy grin with the speech bubble “Three thousand drokens for five-hundred sheets: IT’S A STEEL!” blaring out from a bumperboard. His face just pale and pretty enough to fit the bill for the father-in-law. How could I compete against Aries’ reflection?

Then again, I couldn't be doing too bad for myself if Antiope was here in *my* bed. She had flopped onto her side, and was cradling her head. "What can I do? Can I get you anything?"

"If you're already getting up," she said, "I've got a pounding migraine…I don't know, it must be the alcohol."

"I'll get you some pain-reliever," I hustled to the hatch. "Pills, or powdered solution?"

"Powdered would be great," Ant turned over and smiled. Stroked my cheek. My horns. Greater ripples of pleasure that I had to rein in. "I orbit you," I said.

"I orbit *you*," said Antiope. Her small smile faltered when I went in for one final kiss, just on her forehead. Ant drew back, shrinking in her half of the module. No, not drew back. Flinched. Something Antiope hadn't done since we first met. I hadn't blamed her, then. Having seen firsthand what xenos were capable of on Kaysev. But I also knew what dragoons were capable of, their purpose. A xeno could massacre a planet, a Colony Envoy could massacre a galaxy.

"Sorry," I said, turning away from her. "You know, if you don't want me to touch you, you can just say that. I'm used to hearing it."

Antiope stammered, "It's–it's not that. Well, I don't know, Jean…" She gave my face a proper scan, like a Constable would. Searching the surface for any sign of threats, water, or life. "It's just that Artemis was right. Your horns and your teeth *do* look a lot bigger."

Now, it was my turn to wince. I'd have given anything for her to have slapped me, instead. No, flung a lighter across the hatch and set me ablaze. My voice hitched when I said, "The better to eat you with, I suppose!" I left her resting in the module, alighting in the hall to slam the hatch closed behind me.

My bare feet freezing against the metal plating, but that discomfort was preferable to the needling rage. The kind I didn't know what to do with.

Ant was my girlfriend, my lover in every way, of course I didn't wish ill on her. Shouldn't have shut the hatch so loudly. Shouldn't be boiling with anger over such a little dig. Right?

Doubt threaded through my rage. Ant was just a human, and an Adams, to boot. She didn't know how what she'd said could be so hurtful. That's what I had to tell myself. Ignorance was better than malice, by a longshot.

I padded toward the cockpit. There were always a couple vials of the powdered solution under Ush's seat. In case of emergency.

Pool's voice recocheted against the metal-plating of the corridor as I neared the mouth of it. Blaring, heated, and accompanied by the trilling hiss of their gills flared in rage:

"--*You've never so much as expressed interest in a date, now you're offering to give me a baby! And before even consider–*"

"*Pool…*" Cad's voice was meek and strained.

"*Do* NOT *interrupt me, Nelson!*" Pool bellowed, then went on, "*And before even considering how I felt about the Andromeda Disaster. As if I wouldn't care at all if I laid Kaleidumans or Kaleidizens in a universe where we've been reduced from billions to mere hundreds.*"

Cad piped up, "*I just meant if you want a family, I'm willing to give it to you. I know there's not a lot of time and…Pool, I see now that it wasn't appropriate, but there's no one else I'd want to do that with.*"

Pool's voice cooling to a harsh, but quieter, tone. "*Is that true?"* They said. "*Or is there no one else capable of absolving you of the more burdensome elements?*" I didn't need to know the context to understand the silence following this meant something crucial and brutal had been said. "*Is that the only reason you're interested in me?*"

"*That is not even in the top one-hundred reasons*," Cad's voice was so sincere and tender the very atmosphere softened. Rage tearing out of an invisible airlock, leaving only eighty-percent nitrogen, twenty-percent oxygen, and one-hundred percent awkwardness. "*Do you remember back in seventy-two? You had moved aboard just septurs before, and I came to the cockpit to grab a beer…*"

"*I remember*."

But Cad didn't stop recounting the memory, didn't seem able to stop. "*Jean was still kind of suspicious of you and Ush. And I was, too, to be honest. I'd never been in the same planeton of a Kaleidizen. Yuh Zuh, forget about the same room. And you were tall, and your teeth were sharp–Just like the stories say.*" He chuckled to himself, but his voice was thick, and I could tell her was taking a moment to swipe at his tears. "*But no one ever told me what you'd like when you danced. I thought it was some kind of miracle, I was dizzy and dazzled and moved–and I wasn't even drunk, yet. Then you lost your balance–*"

"*That never happened before I lost my arm,*" Pool chimed in.

"*That's exactly what you said,*" said Cad. "*You said 'I'm off-balance, now. I'm not sure I'll ever feel balanced, again.'*"

"*Then you offered to make my new arm*," Pool continued. "*You said you'd never experimented with such a detailed project, but limbs and organs are just engines with organic jobs. And I said–*"

"'*You think you can fix me?*'" said Cad. "*And I said–*"

"'*There's nothing to fix*,'" said Pool. "'*You're not broken.*'" Each of them were quiet for a long moment. "*That's when I knew, too. How special you were to me.*"

There was no sound, again, and, for a moment, I wondered if they were kissing. Though, I'd never seen a Kaleidizen engage in such an act. And, if I were honest with myself, I didn't trust Cadbury to make such a move without prompting.

Pool spoke, again: "*Just because you visosearched a thing or two about our biology, doesn't mean you know anything about my culture. Kaleidizens don't nurture, we contribute to the hive. Hatchlings aren't reared by their parents, there's no such thing as a family unit. This is about my responsibilities–"*

"*That's a shitty reason to mate with someone*."

"*For a human,*" said Pool, heaving a great sigh. "*River is so different now, but they're right about a few things. I'm compelled to multiply the hive, but in this kind of universe? And, being a literal outcast–a banished Kaleidizen–what does that mean about who I share such a rare experience with?*"

*"I was selfish, I get that*," said Cad.

*"No, not just–You don't–"* Pool chewed their next words over for several avins that left sweat rolling down even my temple. *"It's not the suggestion, it's the inappropriate timing.*"

"*Really?*" Cad's usual cheeriness was seeping into his tone. "*Then, I'm not really sure what's upset you so much. I mean, if you've thought about it…Thought about* us."

"*Even now you're so human-centric*," Pool exclaimed. "*Nelson, it's that you'd venture to suggest your genetic material is just as good as any Kaleidizen's, without any second thought to*

*my own customs. As if I'd so easily hang all my hopes for the future on some guy from Kepler. A human colonizer. You* grossly *underestimate my pain and burden.*"

"*I'm sorry*."

"*I hope I never have to remind you to please be sensitive on this matter…I…I know I don't talk about it much, but what happened to the Andromeda disturbs me to my core. I'll never feel at rest as long as my people don't have a home.*" The slow creak of a swivelling chair. "*I'll see you later, Nelson*."

I scrambled for a hiding place, but Pool caught me standing in the hall. Spikes trembling, nostrils flaring as they nodded at me. "Captain."

"Translation Officer," I said.

Pool strode down the hall, climbed into their own module, and all was quiet.

I crept to the end of the corridor, peering out into the cockpit. "Cad?"

He was curled into a ball in her chair, head propped on the control panel. Tears welling in his eyes. "I just thought–You know, since…All that stuff River said…"

"Come on, dude," I hugged him from behind. "River's a Kaleidizen. You know it's different."

"Yeah, well, why does it have to be?" He thumped the dashboard. "I'm such a fool! Pool's right, I don't know anything about Kaleidizens. Not enough to show even basic decency." He sobbed into his knees. "I'm an absolute fucking *FOOL*."

"You're a quadronically certified mechanic," I reminded him. "Love just makes us do foolish things." I took the seat next to him, behind the wheel. The window an ocean of ink. Sparse red sparks igniting off in the distance. Meteors. Always burning, always with somewhere to go.

A dented adellite carpeted in green rust and frost locked into rotation around the ship. The first image projected across the windshield was a tusked xeno kneeling beside a lawnmower in a grass-stained spacesuit grinning as two Terran children fingerpainted their tusks. "*The grass practically cuts itself in Budino Dome!" the ad proclaimed, "Leasing NOW!"*

Cad swiped.

The next ad was a video. Unskippable, as per usual. The animation style was all too familiar, detailed, stark, and expensive. The Colonies had hired the biggest names in entertainment to produce a series of short films under the name Consulman Common Sense. The character a goofy, over-confident, accident-prone, yet–above all–patriotic father to his daughter, who featured now. Common Sense Carrie trotted into the firelit living room to find her father gingerly changing the diaper of an infant. Carrie pinched her nose at the cartoon diaper, bloated and emanating stink lines. She looked to the audience to question why anyone would have babies if they smell bad and make so much noise. The Consulman's warm, deep voice answered, of course, to insist that children may be a bother for a few yushes before Colony Elementary, but it's a Terrex citizen's responsibility to assist in the human effort to settle space. This meant expanding the size of the nation. Carrie, of course, held her younger sibling and realized her mistake as the baby stopped crying in her arms.

I swiped the video away.

The third ad was a promotion for Cosmic Credit Assistance. "*A Landing License is within reach when you work with a Cosmic Credit spending advisor! Filing fees and background checks REQUIRED!*"

At last, the adellite detached from the Kylix and zipped away. "Did you seriously offer to go half on a clutch of eggs?"

Too soon. Cad gave a great, pained groan. “I don’t know what I was thinking! It’s just that…Pool’s not human. This heat might be their only chance at conceiving *within my lifetime*, and the research is kind of murky–Some of it classified in Colony raids–but it might be my only chance, too.”

I swivelled completely in my seat to face him. Leaning forward to pat his knee as fresh tears blanketed the First Mate’s cheeks. “What do you mean?” I said. “I mean, Nelson, I don’t want to pry, but you’re my closest friend. Whatever you say, whatever you want to keep private, it’s your choice. But if this is about what Boners was going on about, about Atticus R–”

Cad’s warm hand covered mine. “You don’t need to worry about Atticus, Captain.”

“Do *you*?” I shot back. “If this Atticus person is after you…”

“Atticus wouldn’t kill me, they need me,” Cad clarified. “Need me to pay back the eighty-D I made out of their warehouse with, yushes ago.” Cad shut his eyes as if to conjure the face of his old acquaintance.

“You were, what, some kind of…accountant?”

Cadbury chuckled. “No, more like an inventory specialist. I didn’t keep track of *money,* it was the product I was most interested in. That I was *addicted* to.”

Ah, now it was coming together. “Atticus R,” I said. “They’re a druglord.”

Cad nodded, once. “The biggest druglord in all of Open Space, and I was their right-hand-man.” I spared the First Mate a long, sideways glance. I’d known Cad struggled with addiction, in the past, to alcohol and streaker. But a dealer? Moving the stuff? And for someone as dangerous as a major hub, this Atticus R. “Atticus *is* after me, and they’ll capture me when they track me down. But they don’t know where to look, and, because of my hormones, I’d be virtually unrecogizable to them, nowawash, anyway. I give them a wide berth whenever I hear

they're in town near a drop-sight, but, other than that, it's not that hard to avoid them. It is *Open* Space, after all."

"I see," I said. "If that's not what's on your mind, then what is?"

Cad sighed. The drug stuff was one thing, but whatever he was about to get into seemed to weigh as much as the Kylix. "It's just that this kind of stuff makes me think of my mother," he said. "What she said when they left me stranded on Tauceti, about how I can't do anything right, not even just stay a girl."

"Cad…" I wasn't sure what to say at all. Cadbury never talked about their family. I knew he'd had it rough for a few yushes before a mechanics apprenticeship, but relatives weren't a thing he'd brought up. "I'm sorry."

Cadbury's voice was stony. Removed. "It was only partly about Matt, his bid for the Kepler Council was just getting started back then, and it was hard enough for a Griever to get elected. It was best for the campaign that the Cadburys' fuck-up tomboy daughter 'move away.' One part was Matt, and the other was *her*."

The weirdest shiver gripped my brainstem, just then. Dragging the cold trill down my spine in a chill that I only ever felt when Ant brought up her father. I realized, at once, some part of me was picking up on the distinct and deeply acidic hatred a child can feel for their parent.

"Ma–*My mother*–is the most image-obsessed person in all of Inner Space. We had long-sleeves in our closets hung up and ready to hide the welts on our arms for family functions. With her, it was always smile to the camera, then turn it off to bark at you for not smiling wide enough. The value was in the theatrics, the performance of family. Keeping up with the Terrans on TV… I always thought she wanted me to call crying and begging to come home. She wouldn't have come even when I was starving, but I knew she wanted the satisfaction." He

kicked back in his chair, folded his hands behind his head and gazed out the window. “I know it’s silly,” he said. “It’s been ten yushes, and I still let her get in my head!”

“No,” I said. “I mean–” Cad was being so forthcoming tonight. I steeled myself, thinking it would be an insult to retreat now. Try to smooth out this prickly subject with half-truths of my own. “It’s not ridiculous that your mother still gets to you, everything my instructors ever said in Scout school still sticks with me. *Bothers* me.” I swivelled in my chair to join him gazing out at the cosmos. “Everything they ever told me about myself has stayed with me even all these yushes. The war-feats of xenos, even scrawny ones, just like me. We’re made to maul, kill, destroy… I–I never wanted to *create* something meant to *end*.”

“That’s not what you are, Jean,” Cad said it before I was done talking.

“What I *am* is unpredictable,” I shot back. “Everything I’m made of is a mystery to me. Ant–*Terrans*–can trace their families back generations. Even Grievers usually know their parents, but xenos are a grab-bag of who-knows-what. No one even knows where our DNA comes from, it’s all locked away behind federal Terrex security. Whoever I am, on a genetic level, wherever my ancestors come from, if I’m Colony-approved, I want nothing to do with assisting the cause.”

A strange buzz seemed to grow within my horns, as if a hive of bees had found their way in through my giant ears. No, this was just my blood rushing. Feeding those parts of me that someone else tacked on. “Sometimes,” I said, my voice small and echoey in the quiet, dark cabin, “I feel like people just make kids so they can have something to control. You know, because everything else is so, well, *uncontrollable*. I *never* want that control over someone, to decide if they get to exist. To be *responsible* for their shitty life later on.”

Nelson scoffed, “A parent’s job is to raise a child, not an *adult*. Once you’re grown, you have to take responsibility for yourself.”

I couldn’t help but note the Bildwin Brogue latching onto his tone. You can take the man out of the Valley, but you can’t take the Valley out of the man. “You don’t believe that,” I said. Not like a Captain, either, just as a fact. “If you hate the Secretary, then you agree *someone* has to be held responsible. The banks and the labs and the billionaires are all passing the blame, sometimes–”

Cad cracked open the cooler between our chairs. Sliding the metal door open, and reaching into the embedded cabinet to pull out a can of Kylix Kölsch. “Let me guess,” he said. “You just wish someone would pass you a bottle.”

I took it. Toasted it against his can of chilled coffee. For a good while, Cad and I gulped our drinks in complete and cozy quiet. “So,” I said to punctuate my last swig of the Spinach Sour Seasonal, “now you know how I feel about all that business. Not a bad record as far as secrets go, my Doctor and my First Mate.”

“What do you mean?” Cad crushed his can in one hand, and winced as the sharp metal edge nudged into the skin of his palm.

“Ush didn’t ask questions when I asked her to promise me–”

“Promise?” I didn’t turn to look at him, but I felt Cad’s eyes shift to the side of my face. “Promise you what, Captain?”

“To *help* me,” I said. “If I ever *got in trouble,* I asked her to promise to *help* me.”

Cadbury took a moment to read between the lines, but nodded solemnly when he understood. “I had no clue.”

"That was the idea," I replied. "Not even Ant knows about it. I'd do something more permanent, but all that stuff–that *surgery*–seems so invasive. I've never been under the knife, really. Cut open, parts of me taken out…Even if I don't want a uterus, it's still a part of me."

"I get it," Cad noted. "That's why I haven't gotten a hysterectomy, yet. It scares me, plus the yushes fly by, I'll be menopausal in no time. At least, I tell myself that. Top surgery was less optional."

"You still got that scar from when you tore your sutures?"

"Sure do," he flashed it at me–purple and as long as his pinky–along with his nipple.

We both laughed.

For a few peaceful axons, we sat in companionable silence. With our secrets, our admissions. It was Cad who broke it, his voice soft. "I guess since my Mom was so shitty, I always just knew I'd be a better parent. *Wanted to be*."

"I don't care to find out if I'd be," I shrugged. "Ant is enough for me." It was true. Even if, just then, I wondered if I'd always be enough for her.

"Yeah, but what about *after*?" Cad said. "After us? I mean–Xenos live just as long as humans, and that's not very long, Jean. Then the people that remember us die off within just decades, after that. We *disappear* in such a short amount of time–"

"What about *now*?" I said. "All my attention, all my love, all my *time*, I want to spend with Antiope, we don't have enough of it as is. If humans have no *after*, that's for the best. There's hardly enough water for those of us already thirsty. No food, no support from the Colonies even when Grievers rent within them."

"A child is a chance," said Cad.

"A chance to create living pollution, maybe," it was my turn to use that easy shrug the First Mate was so known for. "Humans had their chance, had a *lot of chances*. They blew it."

"No!" Cad shot back, his tone harsh but controlled. "*Terrans* had their chance. People like me, trans people, brown people, we've only ever been running. From the Colonies, from famine…We've never had a chance to thrive. That's what a Griever kid is, Jean. A hope. A living wish."

"Then there's already a bunch of little wishes walking around," I suggested.

This was something I'd thought about more than once. Just as on Wolfthrop, orphans were boarded together all across the galaxy. The Colonies only wanted more workers, fresh blood, their population propaganda campaign never entailed providing for the children once they were born.

Grievelings resided in volunteer-run dormitories usually stationed near schools or farms. With few staff, students were often asked to lend time to the fields. For this reason, moonburn scars were often a sign of an orphaned Griever. Along with ankles marked by regular treks through thornery.

Cad said, "I'd suggest adopting, but Kaleidizens–"

"Right," I said. Kaleidizens traditionally weren't raised by biological parents or adoptive parents. Kaleids developed faster than humans, with nigh-impervious scales covering their entire bodies. Their young received some kind of neural-net memory feeding, then were set loose to wander the galaxy. Mistakes made being the ultimate tool of development as far as Kaleidizen culture considered. Even egg-layers hit the road after ensuring the nest was watched over by a vyjyn, never bothering to lay eyes on their young. In fact, that was taboo.

"I want a family," said Cad, "I want to gift someone else a totally unique view of the universe. But I'm not willing to stop taking my hormones, and a pregnancy would wreck havok on my dysphoria. If this is Pool's only chance, then it's mine…" He curled his knees up to his chin. Wrapped his arms around himself. At once, I understood. Kaleidizens famously accepted DNA from hosts of every gender when it came to mating with humans. The burden of birth lay entirely with the egg-layer. "If this is *our* only chance, then I'm blowing it."

"Just give them some time to cool off," I suggested. "Love's like fire, it needs oxygen. Space, room to grow."

"Is that what you're doing out here?" He slumped back in his chair. "Giving her highness some space?"

The rare spat of snark from Cadbury, leaving more of a sting with the strange position we were all in. There came nine rapid knocks at the hatch, though, so I didn't have to dwell on the slight for long. "I'm getting her highness some pain meds," I started up the metal rungs to the hatch door. "Ush has–"

"Prescription stuff," said Cad. "Endomotoroil."

"Endometriosis," I corrected him. Ush kept a yush's supply of super-strength pain meds on hand because of her affliction, so was always willing to share. Especially since she could re-up with her League ID for fairly cheap at any decent vendor. "I know this is really heavy stuff, but there *are* some good signs. They're showing interest, telling you intimate things. Pool's trying to get closer to you. All you have to do is let them, at their own pace."

Cad glared out into the Milky Way. "Thanks, Jean," he said flatly. "You really think we can get past this?"

"Everyone wishes there was *something* they could take back," I braced my hand on the lever operating the hatch manually, embedded in the roof. "Pool knows you mean well. Next time, though, maybe start with plans for dinner." I pulled the lever, a metal thunk as the airlock layer released.

"Jean?" Cad said at such a volume, I knew to pause before letting the hatch swing open. So I held it in place.

"Yeah?"

"I'm a complete mess," said Nelson. "I don't mean that I just keep striking out with Pool, but–I've been looking at those manuals you gave me." He slid one out from under him, then. A battered copy of the original SUNKISSED FR-8 Extra Room – Or FR-8 E.R. – pilot's manual. "Engines, inner workings…That kind of stuff *clicks* with me. You just spark it up, and *boom*. But piloting requires operation in such a deliberate and specific sequence, I–It makes no sense to me. I've been thinking…" Nelson picked at the peeling leather on his seat. "Pool's right, I really am just some guy from Kepler." Cad cast a long glance over his shoulder back at the Leftmost control panel, where the Translations Officer and Doctor typically sat. "Your promise with Ush, you obviously trust her, and you *should*. She's earned it. Just like she's earned the title of First Mate."

So this was what Cad had literally been sitting on all this time. I thought back to Ush's comment days ago. So many things had happened, since, it seemed such a small sticking point to me. Just another thorn in the bramble. Now, though, I wondered, truly, if I'd met Ush first, if she'd be the Kylix crew's dedicated doctor *as well as* keen First Mate. "Sometimes," I said, "you don't earn a title, you grow into it." I thought back to the last few years, how we'd had to tighten up after the hydrotower incident. All of us, sure, but someone had to keep the books, steer, keep

the crew fed, and keep us out of trouble. Through this, I'd learned to be more mindful, less sloppy. More alert, less lax. More vicious, less forgiving. "I did."

Below me, Cadbury nodded once, his brow furrowed. "I think I understand."

"If you don't, now," I leaned away from the hatch to allow it to pop open. "You will when you need to."

"Jean?"

I placed a palm over the center of the hatch, and pressed it inward to pause its outward swing. "Yeah?"

Nelson picked at the peeling leather of his swivel chair. "It's just—Maybe you're right. About some things, anyway." He said, "Matt's my own brother, but he just stood aside while Ma packed up my sports bras and threw out my binders."

"That's really fucked up, Cad," I said. "But what's that got to do with me?"

He gave that signature, breezy shrug. "I don't know–I guess I'm realizing that I'm so preoccupied trying to replace my birth family with another birth family, I never think much about the family *we* have *now*."

A chuckle tore loose of my throat before I could think to restrain it. "If this crew's a family, don't go getting any ideas about making me the parent."

Cad had his reply ready, "You don't have to be the parent, or the sibling, or the cousin…Or the dog." The last three words he added after such a brief pause, I was flooded with warmth for my friend. "It doesn't get any clearer than this: They dropped me off, *you picked me up*. Matt's my brother, but, Jean, you're my *blood*."

The exact quantitative meaning of Nelson's words were as difficult to pin down as a cloud, but I knew the weight of them the same way I knew when rain was coming. "I love you,

too, Cad." Cool, filtered air poured out of the Harmony as I let the hatch fall open. Washing over me, along with several shafts of fluorescent light.

XG-L smirked down at me. "Hey, I thought we could catch up." They started down the ladder, extending a pair of shadefruit on the same stem to me to take, below. "You know, when the Captain's away, the xenogenes–" They paused at the bottom of the ladder as Cadbury drifted into view. "Ah, my apologies for the intrusion. I see you're busy."

"No, no," Nelson collected himself, pulling on his Garfield slippers. "It's fine, I can, uh, give you two some privacy?"

L blinked in surprise. "Really," they grinned. "That'd be great. Wow, this crew is much less uptight than mine." L nudged me. "Unless you need the Captain's permission to catch up with an old friend?"

Cadbury's eyes lingered on L's hands, the xeno's fingers grazing my waist, my neck… "We take privacy seriously aboard this vessel," he said. "Jean won't tell the Captain, and I won't, either."

I understood the gesture plainly for what it was. Cad was handing me a free pass to something I'd never even considered: Cheating. What this meant between us, not to mention Ant and I, didn't seem to come together, cleanly.

The Navigator and I hadn't exactly discussed monogamy. Shit, it seemed miraculous enough that we'd met. As incredible as the formation of life on a planet, not too close to the sun, not too far.

As miraculous as our love was, though, it wasn't like it could erase my attraction to anyone else, let alone to other Xenos. That throbbing, natural desire, misted in the heady spice of pheromones wafted off of their fuzziest regions. "Um, goodnight, First Mate Cadbury."

Cad waved, shuffling down the corridor to his sleepmodule. Leaving XG-L and I well and truly alone, our conversation, even, muted by the glaze on everyone's module-door.

"I'm not imposing, am I?" XG-L took a big bite of one of the fruit, slumping into Antiope's chair at one end of the dashboard. "*Jean,* did he call you? Is that some kind of nickname?"

Fuck. Just a little thing, but sweat sprang to my palms as I took the seat next to the xeno. We couldn't so much as hint at our more than working relationship. That our crew was any different from anyone else's. "It's what he calls the Medic, actually," I said. "Doesn't care enough to even remember my initials." I risked a bite into the remaining shadefruit.

It was a mildly psychoactive fruit, way less so than Streaker. About as potent as smoking weed, but easier to get one's hands on considering the restrictions imposed by the Temperance Order.

Black juice dribbled down my chin. XG-L swiped at the mess with their thumb. "Didn't look like a casual conversation to me. You two in private," they said. "Were you being reprimanded? Be honest, your mate is the Kaleidizen, isn't it?"

"No," I said. "I, uh, wouldn't engage in that kind of thing with a crewmate."

"After all this time, you're by the book, eh?" L took another bite of their fruit, and I matched them. Careful to avoid the large pit at the center. "I don't buy it."

"You don't have to," I teased, though I had to force the humor in my tone. Not like it wasn't great seeing an old lover, but this dragoon act was draining. XG-L only knew I'd deserted at some point, the extent of our crimes so far wouldn't be so easily overlooked.

For a while, we both fixed our eyes on the misshappen window in the Kylix's cockpit. Ovular, and just over the size of a head. It could be misstaken for a portrait sometimes, when we

were truly at orbit. Hovering in one place and having to fix our eyes on something other than our empty pantries. Now, though, a river of dark matter washed over a tall cluster of distant stars. Washing the formation into a loose trail. Like water over a kid's sandcastle.

"Did they tell those stories in your bunker?" said L.

They didn't have to specify which ones.

Back on Wolfthrop, the age groups were kept apart to keep the older kids from mauling the younger ones. Apparently, it had been a pretty regular practice before the rule was implemented. By the time we were shipped off to Serpentaurus, bed-time had become a swamp of brags and stats. But before we were fifteen, when the dark of each drain seemed extra dark, and whimpering and bed-wetting were more common than any bragging, every xeno had swapped the stories about XG-Infinity.

"Of course," I said.

XG-L chuckled. "Really makes me remember what a pup I was," they said. "Some zombie xenogene swooping in through the windows and whisking us away to some haven in outer space."

"All kids dream," I said. "And all kids tell fairy tales." A beat. "Some even believe in them."

XG-L whittled their shadefruit down to that pulp-furred pit, giving a dark and throaty scoff. "Then it's a good thing everyone grows up, eventually."

"Too fast," I said, popping open the cooler to grab two cans of Oregano Kolsch. I offered one to L, but they refused it. I popped open both, and took turns pouring them into my mouth.

"Too fast," XG-L agreed. They nibbled on the stoney pit of the shadefruit as I downed both beers. The alcohol burbling in my stomach, washing away my veneer of professionality, and pulling my thoughts about Antiope to the surface to fester.

Every worried wrinkle in her brow was etched into my memory. Fear or anxiety? Was there a difference? Care for me, or love for her family? How big a difference was that? Did it matter? Of course she cared about her family more, she'd spent twenty-five yushes with them, and only two with me. One and a half, by some metrics. Less, if we were counting in-person interactions.

Now, for the first time, I understood Ush's apprehension about my familiarity with Ant. In terms of intimate face-time, I didn't know her at all.

My fiance was a stranger to me.

*No,* I crushed the can of Kolsch in my fist, and dropped it into the minicinerator. I just needed another drink. That would clear things up. Alcohol was a truth-bringer. Things only seemed confusing at first because there was still a part of me that wasn't drunk.

If I could drown them out…

I reached into the cooler, and pulled out a Melon Kolsch.

We'd been saving this batch for a special occasion. Melon was a rare fruit in Open Space. Watery and crisp, with a bright taste that brought to mind those blue skies and lapping rivers back on the mudball most of us Grievers had never been permitted to set foot on.

I popped open the tab, and chugged it.

"You sure know how to put 'em away," L watched as I finished the can, wiped my mouth with the back of my sleeve. "Where do you all get so much beer, anyway? It's not liquor, but it's still pretty hard to come by."

*Can't you just mind your sodding business?* "The Outternet," I said. "They, uh, sell beer in bulk."

L snorted. "I'd make a note of that, but Starling wouldn't permit me to drink." They slapped their belly, rolling their eyes. "He wants me to keep my kidney and liver 'untainted.' You know, in case he needs one in a few yushes."

"Right," I had to bite back what I actually wanted to say. "Makes sense."

The beer washed over me, and a bitter kind of crumb embedded in the back of my throat. As it melted, every second brought a new wave of nausea. The cabin tipped back and forth, as if it balanced on an invisible scale. Which side was right, I wasn't sure. Though I knew which side was wrong.

L turned their back to the window to face me, "Hey, want to see how strong my jaws are?"

For some reason, it was this that made my stomach flutter. Showing off, a xeno habit I'd missed. If we had more time, I'd suggest we race our ships side-by-side, see who could emerge first from an icestorm. "I know how strong you are, L."

They balanced the pit in their jaws, fangs sinking past the pulp, through the seedskin. "Yeah, but that's brute strength. I've been working on my finer muscles, you see," they spoke past the pit, spraying spittle, but I didn't mind.

"I can see that," I said.

"No, you can't," L spat the pit into their palm as I took the final bite of my own fruit. "Let me show you." The pilot tipped their face toward mine, horns fitting snugly between mine, and grazing the insides of my own so pleasure rippled through me. Guilty pleasure.

"Wait," I said, only managing when the xeno's lips were already grazing mine. L's thick, heady scent was like perfume. "I can't–I *shouldn't*."

"Because of this invisible mate of yours?" the Xeno drew back, but groaned as they did. "You too good for us savages, eh?"

"It's not that," I said.

The xeno huffed, swiveling Antiope's chair toward the dashboard. "I missed you, you know. It's not like I'm some monster who only thinks about killing."

"I don't think you are," I said, and I meant it. "I mean…I don't know everything you've done, but–" Now, though, I wasn't sure where I was going with this. *But we had sex and you didn't rat me out so I know you're somehow a good person, even though you annililate innocents as a nine-to-five?* "But I know you *can* be good."

"You're too runty to be talking down to me, XG-J," L shoved to their feet. Their Colony uniform fell around them so neatly it was as if the xeno were a seven-foot pillar garbed in gold. XG-L stepped into the narrow space between the dashboard and me. Not forcing me to back into the dash, but leaving me with no choice but to. "But you're not too good to give in to your instincts."

"L, whatever you're thinking–" I started.

"Seriously, J," L shook their head, chuckling darkly. "I'm not going to *make* you do anything. Not all xenogenes do that kind of thing."

"No," I said. "You don't force anyone to do anything but die, how merciful of you."

"I've had about enough of your judgement," L snarled in earnest. Bared their sharp teeth.

I returned the gesture, showing my sabers. "You mean the truth."

"There're those xeno roots showing," L smirked. They guided their horns into the space between mine, once more. All-out rubbing them, this time. The fine, firm yet fuzzy cartilage of theirs sending shivers all the way down to the end of my tail.

"I don't hide my roots," I said. "They're as obvious as my teeth."

"Then let's mate," said the xeno. The use of the primal word inspiring tendrils of want to unfurl in my gut. Before I could protest any more, L urged my legs apart. Stepping between them and taking that kiss I was holding out on. XG-L's breath hot on my throat. Searing saliva oozing down my chin as the xeno deepened the kiss. Hands clasped around the back of my head to keep me from turning away before their tongue could find mine. "Whoa, what're you–?"

Fury surged through me in a great growl as I shoved L across the cockpit. I drew my forearm across my mouth. Antiope, I was going to have to tell Antiope. "L, you have to give more warning before doing things like that."

"Why?" XG-L smirked, "because you liked it?"

"Because it's really rude and invasive not to give me time to decide," I snapped. "I want to try to be friends, but–my relationship with this *invisible mate* is realer than you think." I handed them my shadefruit pit. "You should get to bed. My Captain's got a migraine, and I'm bringing them pain medication."

XG-L's shoulder's sagged. "I see," they uttered. "I'm, uh, sorry for being so pushy." They ascended the ladder to the hatch. "Be honest, your mate is one of your crewmates? I can keep a secret, J."

"I know you can," I lied. "No, it's not one of them."

Ren Starling occupied my seat at the control panel, when I emerged, stretching, from the mouth of the hall the next morning. The only thing that quieted me was the cloud of bright blue, fist-sized snow-flakes whistling past the windows. In the distance, obscured by the indigo snow, dozens of city-sized orange rings–miniscule meteor crumbs worked into a spinning disc by the gravity of the black metal cube at the center of the them. The correctionBelt. Overnight, we'd leapt thousands of planeons through space.

"Morning Capt–Pilot," Cad caught himself. Seated at the panel next to Starling, and holding a hot pot of coffee in place of the usual iced.

"First Mate," I nodded.

Ush was already awake, too. Lab coat collar drawn high to hide her face from Starling, who had a foot kicked up in Pool's empty seat between them. "J," she said, curt.

"Doctor," I replied, then ventured nearer to Nelson. I didn't want any part of me to so much as brush against Starling, had gone through great pains to stuff my tail into my underwear. I kept my elbows in to look between him and Cad to view our position in the tiny monitor blinking our coordinates. "We've gone forward," I noted, "but…to the side, too?"

"That's what Captain Starling was just telling us," Cad said flatly, stroking his stubble and shifting his slippers. "We're going a bit off course–"

"Answering some beacon," Ush said with a voice so prickly I winced. "Don't worry, Starling's assured us it *isn't* life-threatening." Her tone was firmer than Cad, more critical, more annoyed.

"Then why?"

"Ah!" Ren Starling shot to his feet, smoothing the front of his suit. "Now that the Captain is with us, I can explain."

Indeed, Antiope had stumbled out of our module, her messy, off-kilter suit covered in my fur. She yelped at the sight of our visitor. Brushing her hands hastily over her legs to loose hundreds of black blades of my tailfur. “Captain Starling,” said Ant, side-stepping him to avoid his open hand. “It’s early, I’m afraid you’ve caught me off guard.” She activated the visojector.

“Is that not another way of saying in an *intimate* position?” Starling sidled up to her. So emboldened as to close an arm over her under the guise of pointing at our blinking blue coordinates. “This is us, there. That blinking dot. Ships use exovectular technology to pinpoint our locations so far from satellite activity.”

“I’ve been inside a ship before, Captain,” Ant assured him. “I know how positioning tech works.”

“Of course,” said Starling. “It’s just that men have a better capacity for the technical aspect, I thought you’d appreciate a more scientific perspective.”

Ush made no effort to lower their voice when they said, “And what field of science do you specialize in, exactly? Jackassery?”

Cadbury cleared his throat, hacking and pounding on the steel siding of the walls to drown out the last half of Ush’s sentence. “We’ve travelled so far already, crew–” He shot the Medic a hard, stern look. “--I think Captain Starling was just about to explain our next stop.”

“Jeez,” Starling activated his helmet with a button along his collar. “What is that, Orbiting Illness? Your Doctor must be a hack if she hasn’t checked your throat for green spots.” He took the time to refresh his in-suit oxygen supply before going on. “I’ve got a beacon, code silver. My ship must be the only dragoon for hundreds of planeons, or I’d let the next take a crack at it. Should be a quick job, in-and-out. Unless you’d like to make it more interesting, Adams.”

"Interesting?" Ant raised an eyebrow at him.

Starling shrugged. "Sometimes we take bets amongst the crew, keeps morale up, considering we're being made to be the Terrex garbage collecters." He leaned in so close to Ant, their lips were a mere hairsbredth away from touching. "Finn's kept a few, off the books. Looks inside, does experiments–Freakish things!" He shuddered.

"Sure," Ant swallowed, hard. "Freakish."

She and I avoided eye contact as XG-L, above in the coupled Harmony ship, guided the Kylix in close to a little planet with a thick, murky brown atmosphere. The little brown ball was lonesome where it rotated around a red star that lashed it with whips of fire every few avins.

L timed the atmospheric entry perfectly, though, slipping in between solar flares to rocket us through the muddy air. Smears of streaking oil sticking to the Kylix's windshield so I wondered if Wirro might be able to send some bactericlean through the printer.

The Harmony pulled out of the dive as the ground–hilly and dappled in tall, blue grass–lurched into view. With some jolting, but no losses of balance, we alighted in one such field. The jets singeing away the grass under us to wilted, black crisps.

In the distance, figures clad in heavy blue hoods hustled into the tallest thickets of curling blue grass. As if to camouflage into it. Glints of metal catching the red rays of sunlight, at times, just well enough for me to make out stray, rusted panels embedded in the ground amidst the indigo forest. Scraps, from previous ships. My stomach churned slowly, flipping clean over, as every hair on my body stood on end. "We're not alone."

"Never are, on these kinds of assignments," Starling said, shaking his head. "So it's true what they say? The higher-ups keep your family away from all the action?" Ren Starling strode to Antiope's hotshot, hanging on a hook next to the mouth of the corridor. He tossed it to her.

"Whoa, what're you–" She caught it.

"Don't worry," said Starling. "The safety's on." He started up the metal rungs to the hatch on the ceiling, rooting around in his goldsuit pocket a moment before extending a closed fist to Ant. "Do you know how these work?"

Starling let six or so stunstones fall into Ant's palm. She nodded, pocketing them. "You throw them on the ground."

"And if the ground's too soft, throw them at a target," added Starling. "Captain, do you want to do the honors?" He motioned to me, Ush, and Cad, still seated around the control panel.

"What?" said Antiope.

"Allow me," I shoved to my feet. "Kylix crew, let's move."

Cad and Ush snapped to attention. Starling glared down at us, "Where's the other one? That weird guy?"

As if on cue, Pool came stretching out of the corridor. "Just getting in my beauty-sleep, Captain Smarmy–I mean, Starling." They tugged their sleeve over the Easer snug on their wrist. The Translations Officer had taken on the same form as yesterwash, which must've taken forever to achieve given the randomizer function of the watch.

Together, we ascended into the Harmony. Joined with medic Finn, First Mate Dexter, and XG-L. All save for L having donned their hotshot holsters. Gleaming guns at the ready.

My crew spared me long, nervous looks as we climbed down to the surface. Helmets drawn over our heads, and our backs only to each other. It'd been a long time since we'd touched down on a strange planet. I didn't recognize the pattern of the black sunspots bruising the burning red star in the distance. "Where are we, exactly?"

"Backwater region," was all Starling managed.

Antiope leaned into a projection Ush conjured from their own wristwatch. Pinching to zoom into the grid, the little spinning hologram. Ant said, “According to the Off-Colony Index, this body is referred to as ‘Vuzilika.’”

“That’s Ruwrgr,” Pool explained, stepping forward into a marshy bubble of land that burst into a soup of mud and limp, blue blades. “For ‘swamp.’”

“Ruwrgr?” Dexter looked to his Captain.

“Rat-Chat,” Starling confirmed.

Pool bristled, pausing in place to gape at the back of Starling’s helmet as the Captain advanced through the grass. I clapped them on the shoulder, “Just a while longer.” We walked side by side, wearing down a path. As for what lied outside of the narrow window we bore through the field, I had no idea, and my nose, for once, couldn’t give me so much as a hint. “The air here is too clouded with vapor. Heavy, humid. I can’t smell a thing.”

“Yeah,” L cracked their knuckles. “*You* can’t. Those huge horns are clogging your sinuses, J. Stand aside and watch a pro at work.” XG-L took in a massive breath. Held it for a long while before exhaling, slowly. Letting the air roll over their tongue. Leave its imprint of our surroundings. “About three hundred paces, Captain. One hundred forward, two to the right. There’s metal near it, I smell rust. More than anything, there’s that rust.”

“It’s the water,” Starling frowned down at it, thick and muddy.

“Astounding investigative work,” Ush said.

“It scatters the scent, that’s their pathetic excuse for a strategy.” Starling drew his hotshot, aimed it just overhead, and held down the trigger. “As for the grass, it’s nothing a quick trim won’t fix.” A hot, blue ray of light jetted out of the end of the gun to saw down every blade of grass north of us.

Finn, the Harmony crew medic, started to draw his own hotshot, but I stayed his hand. My voice harsh and loud when I said, “Have you lost your oxygen supply? You’re going to give away our–” Starling felled a bushel of plants that two–no, three–no, five–sweaty, gray-skinned humans were watching us from behind. “Position!”

Hot, blue jets of light seared across the field, whisking past my suit so the material curled back, blackened, before mending over my skin.

“DON’T SHOOT!” The Translations Officer bound to the front of the group, between us and the coming rush of oozing gray skin. That was right, I remembered just then, given their current, human appearance. Pool would survive a few lashes of fiery heat. Cad, however, in the confusion, forgot this.

“Pool, no!” Cadbury shoved them out of the way as a volley of lasers swallowed the First Mate. Leaving him curled over, clutching his arm. Blood streaming between his fingers as the scent of cooked flesh rode the gray smoke wafting off of him. “*IT BURNS!*” Cad spasmed, flailing madly in the grass as more lasers, still, swept over him. “*WATER! I NEED WATER!*”

“EYES!” Antiope screamed, hurling the handful of stunstones into the mass of bounding gray.

Shimmering, blue cubes sprang up to enclose three of our assailants, the remaining stunstones bouncing off their bare, sagging skin and sinking into the swamp underfoot.

Starling grabbed Ant’s wrist, and wrenched it into the mud to mow down the nearest pair. Two fell, one upon the other, thumping to the wet, grassy ground. One retained their skin, though, up-close, the likeness of a human was much less convincing. Still, their hoods were drawn so I could only make out their sliver-thin fangs, not their eyes, or faces.

It was only when they fell into the water, twitching and clutching at wounds clotting with mud, that their glittering snouts come into view. Kaleidizens. Their scaled, mud-caked faces peering out from behind disintegrating human pelts. One rose, oozing sludge, from the swamp, vomiting water and gurgling words I couldn't make out.

The memory reel in my mind raced backwards to Ant in her dragoon, back on the Undergal. Her crewmates hadn't just been killed, they'd been *flayed*.

It was one thing to think back to the suffocating Terrans, asphixiation and space went together like brown on bread. That was an omnipresent, modern death. This was *medeival*.

"What'd I tell you, Adams?" Starling pulled Ant to her feet. "Monsters, overgrown weeds…This place is in need of a gardener."

At once, the far south of the marshland shimmered. Like some kind of strange trick on the bloodied water, the grass shifting just so. A sterling cosmopod blinking into existence within the five-cometon space as easily as a moth glides into a cockpit.

There was a sort of mental lag, as everyone processed what just happened. A cosmopod tricked out with cloaking tech. Just as Terrex had stolen lasers, it seemed the Kaleidizens were putting those ransacked dragoons to good use.

"What the hell?" Starling renewed his grip on his weapon, nodding at Ant's holstered hotshot. "*Cover me!*"

"But–" Ant backed into me as Starling ducked into another thicket of grass, motioning for XG-L to follow, who dutifully did.

One Kaleidizen with purple-hued, crusty scales surged out of the cosmopod. Slamming into me as I threw myself in front of Ant to knock the both of us sideways into the grass. Blue

stalks rolled over my vision, interwoven with glimpses of gray skin pelts, so I wasn't sure which I was clutching at in my struggle to my feet.

Mud smeared across my helmet as my attacker clawed at the thick glass. Spitting mud, and viscous pale green globs that slimed over the surface like snot. *VENOM*.

The jig was truly up, and this was the second volley of reinforcements.

I stopped struggling, grappling with their shoulders to try to get them to look me in the eye. "Listen to me–! It's not what you–!"

"Don't bother, genefreak! I don't expect anything less from you! *Eskerell uol jor weporward!*" The Kaleidizen pounded on the glass of my helmet. Their fists bounced off, for now, but the air pressure dial within my neckline was falling *fast*. "The audacity! Well, I'm glad you decided to finally return what you've stolen." The Kaleidizen thrust their hands into my pockets while I tried to wrangle my brain back onto the stem.

Dexter, the First Mate of the cosmocraft Harmony, ducked between us to jam his hotshot into the Kaleidizen's throat. Blasting several blackened and smoking spinal disks into the mud below. Though they regenerated just as quickly.

The violet Kaleid regained control just as suddenly as they'd lost it, twisting the First Mate's arm behind his back in time to push him onto it.

Long, white splinters burst out of Dexter's elbow. Bone.

"STOP!" Pool braced a hand on their watch, but didn't deactivate the Easer. Glancing around at our company. "We don't want to fight! *Viodula tij zokan!*"

A rust-hued Kaleidizen strode out of the cosmopod, wielding two hotshots. "We hardly talk to humans," they said, "and we surely don't talk to dogs." These guns were some kind of specialty-build. As heavy as Pool's metal arm, and just as complex, too. With long handles bent

at the optimal vertical angles, and barrels composed of two metal steel tubes wound together like DNA or mating snakes.

They pulled both triggers, and a stream of lasers rained down into the swamp like liquid fire. Blue and red, hot and hotter. Steam rising from the murky water. Smoke rising from the cooking fishlife. Black and choking out the ventilation of my suit.

I felt around for the exhaust button. Pressed in just in time to watch a clear view of a laser glancing off of my helmet.

It deflected across my leg, instead. Searing my suit away. Eating a hot, smoking line across my calf. Now, the scent of cooking Xeno joined the smell of fish.

I tried to wave the steam out of my face, but gave up. Pressing closer to the water to crawl under it toward a faint glint in the tall grass stalks.

Dexter's gun.

I reached toward it, the veins in my hand pulsing in time with my heart. I'd never used a hotshot before. I knew they weren't supposed to get wet, but this wasn't full-on submersion. The air was humid, I wondered if that factored in. Though, the steam was beginning to float upward.

My fingers closed around one end, but not the handle. The shooting end. I corrected my grip, running my palms along the now-slimey underside of the ovular barrel.

I gave no thought as to my status in the Harmony crew's eyes when I shouted, "FALL BACK!"

Finn, the Harmony's medic, cradled Dexter– curled choking in the water as their arm belched blood. "You don't have to tell me twice." Finn thrust an arm under Dexter's to support him, and heaving to their feet while oozing thick, brown, foul-smelling muck. "Come on, Dex, let's get out of here."

A beam of the twined lasers lashed across the swamp, toward the limping crewmates.

"STOP!" Ant shouted, flashing the silver suitcase in her arms. I hadn't noticed her taking it out of the cranny. "It's us you want. Leave them out of it."

Until now, there had been no chance to look closely at faces or features of the two Kaleidizens. It had only been washes, but there was just a glimmer of familiarity to the look of Drip and Pond. They'd certainly done their share of moulting, shedding down to bright, new coats. And they'd each put on a few inches, as well, in the height department. If there was any flash of recognition, for me, it was in the eyes. The delicate, individual tilt of each of their three nostrils. The curve of their spikes.

The twined laser rescinded into the hotshot. Pond sniffed, their rust-colored scales gleaming in the late afternoon light. "Give me one reason not to blow you back to the Big Bang."

"Easy," Ant was prepared: "You'd be taking yourself with me."

"Trust me," I piped up. "We're not with those Colony hounds."

"Then who *are* you with?" Drip snapped. "How are we supposed to trust you when we don't know who you answer to?"

"We're with each other," I said.

"Judging by those guns," said Ant. "The better question is 'Who do *you* answer to?'" She nodded at Pond's gun armature. "Those are prototypic Gemini Hotshots, using irisilic proton tech from the Colonies and Kaleidizen technology. The Gemini failed to secure funding from the Colonic Council because of the secrecy-clause in the Skirmish treaty."

"You know all this because of your City Planning degree?" I asked.

"Independent study," Ant replaced the silver suitcase, shoving it into the cranny. "I don't like guns, but according to the *Beginner's Guide to Treason*–"

"Don't finish that thought without a lawyer, princess," Ush chimed in.

"My point is," Ant cleared her throat. "You're not working *with* the Eldeniv, are you? They would *never* leak Kaleidizen secrets."

"'With them,'" said Pond. "'In their best interest,' it's the same thing."

"It's not the 2140s, anymore," said Drip. "The Eldeniv are out of touch, it's the Vojiviq's time to usher in a new era of reparations for what remain of our people."

"That's fine," I said, aiming the hotshot in my own hands at the water pooling up to our ankles. "Just leave us out of it." I pressed the trigger, bracing in the mud for the resulting jolt. A red beam struck the water, sending up a fresh plume of steam. "Let's go! *EVERYONE! NOW!*"

Pool didn't heed this command, rising from the water like a buried monument. Mud sloughing off to leave those clean, glittering, copper-colored scales.

They strode through the steam, fingers playing along the dials on the watch around their wrist. At once, the human skin retreated into the Easer.

The Translations Officer unlatched the watch in front of the two Kaleidizens.

"The body models," said Pool, holding the Easer out to the pair.

The rust-scaled Kaleid–Pond– snorted. "The algorithm needs variety," they said. "Sixty-five human scan inputs *at least,* for best believability. Not to mention, to buck facial recognition tech. Human, yet artificial. Recognizable unrecognizability." They took the Easer. "It's not our work, software never has been. Actually, I could never even afford one." They sneered as they handed it back to Pool.

"Neither could I," Pool shot back. "It was a gift. I never knew the price."

"*Nakko sif ij*," said Drip. "You tell yourself that."

"So, if those two pale humans are your pretend-mates…" Pond nodded in the fog-slurred direction that Finn and Dexter had stumbled off into. "Then, who is responsible for *this*?" They cast those bright, six eyes across the mass of limbs, loosed, scattered scales, and ichor-stained pelts.

An ear-stabbing *BOOM* briefly granted flight to every corpse on the ground.

I clapped my hands to my ears.

Right. In the flurry, and confusion, I'd forgotten about Starling. The Captain, and his pilot.

A spray of hot blue laser fanned out of the eastmost marsh, and someone gave a pained shout that echoed across the water like a skipping stone.

"Cymar of the Eldeniv," Drip groaned. "There's always a runner."

"Pool," Cad held his side to right himself, wincing. He frowned down at the sea of stiffened limbs and congealing ichor. "You don't look well, I think you should wait in the ship."

Pool stepped backward, away from the rest of us. Their eyes flitting to the struggle in the distance, a palm clasped over the Easer on their wrist. Each of their six eyes was haunted in a different way as they turned the dial. At once, they were consumed by some strange human face. "If I hadn't shown up in disguise, none of this would have happened," they said. "I'm seeing this through."

Before either of us could grab them, the Translations Officer charged into the marsh. Clean through into the field of shaved grass, sweeping their arms across the blue field as if struggling to swim against a strong current.

"Pool!" Cadbury bound into the grass after them, clutching his still-sizzling arm laceration. He didn't bother with the fake name, maybe couldn't remember it. "*POOL! At least wait for me!*"

Together, as one, we clambered into the grass, streaking off after our crewmates.

While the vast swathe of grassland was sprinkled with rusted metal plating, no cluster was so concentrated as the talls doors of steel curved around each other like giant mud-washed petals of some tin flower in the far end of the field.

Blue lasers bloomed out of the marsh. Lashes of red intermittent, not in streaks, but a series of pitiful shots that fell to the grass to send up gray smoke and the scent of burning earth.

Whatever we were hurtling toward, I refused to let Pool encounter it before me.

An urgency I hadn't felt since the rolling orange, rocky fields of Kaysev gripped me. My legs pumping under me like the alternating parts of a machine, and a dangerous one.

River swam into view before the Captain. Taller, like Drip and Pond, but they'd seen better days.

There were long strips of pale green skin across the Kaleidizen's body. The scales replaced with dozens of layers of laser scarring.

Ichor, too, was oozing from River's rightmost nostril.

They swiped at it, glancing up from their kneeling position in the grass. "Pool?"

"Behind you!" Pool pointed.

Ren Starling charged out of a thicket with his cracked helmet aimed at River.

The Kaleidizen was too slow for the Captain. Starling leapt, slamming the hard glass against River's skull. Which caved in a moment before knitting together, again.

I had a feeling this had occurred more than a few times already.

"Fight, River!" Drip put up their own fists and struck the air.

"Pick up your gun!" Pond added, heaving their own off of their shoulder and sliding it across the grass. "Here, take mine!"

"It doesn't matter," River panted. Ichor leaking out of the side of their mouth. "It's my fault, I fell for the diversion. A grenade trick."

"What are you talking about?" Pool said.

"It's over," River closed six eyes, and opened two extra ones. Glowing orange, the light thrumming in time with Pool's as they opened their mind to the Kaleid.

This left their back vulnerable to Captain Starling, who drew a machete from a long hidden pouch in his suit pantleg.

"Took you all long enough," Starling reared his arm back to swing.

The blade *CLANGED* against my horns as I struck Starling's body. Loose teeth of the serrated edge raining down over my helmet. Some embedding in the cartilage of my horns as he pushed me away.

"AGH!" Starling stumbled backward. The front of his golden suit was in shreds, but it mended in seconds. The machete in his hands was now bent, and he cast it into the grass as he struggled to catch his breath. "What the–fuck is–wrong with–you?"

I backed up to rejoin my crew, eyeing the upside down hull of some ravaged dragoon ship. Rusted with water exposure, just a few cometons behind the Harmony Captain.

Again, I charged. With less adrenaline–I'd never muster that speed again–but just as much power. Catching Ren Starling in the chest. Head down so the smooth, curved front of my horns pressed into his collarbone. The momentum carrying us both to the hull.

This time, Starling made no sound when he slammed back-first into the slab of old metal.

He didn't close his eyes as his head snapped backwards. They remained open as he heaved one long sigh, before a soft snore replaced his panting breath.

No one protected Starling's head when it fell. Mouth open, so the few living fish that remained explored his tongue where it flopped in the water.

"The laying ground?" said Drip, coming to River's side to hoist them to their feet.

"It's not something *anyone* should witness in person," said River plainly, nodding at the west end of the marsh.

"We'll find another home, there are grounds just as good," Pond slid under River's other arm. "In the meantime, you could use a nice, long iron bath." Drip and Pond supported the Kaleid so River's feet only glided over the grass. "The season isn't over, yet."

"No," said River. "Those dogs are only getting started."

As one, the three made their way across the swamp. Back, toward their cosmopod. Toward the holographic blue cubes containing the few Kaleid survivors.

Drip snarled over their shoulder, "What about Huber?"

"What he doesn't know won't hurt him," said Pond, though their tone didn't match the surety of their words. "We'll regroup with everyone, migrate, come back stronger. We always do, right, River?"

River didn't respond, hanging their head as they glided over the grass. Gills shrunken back in a way I'd never witnessed in a Kaleidizen. Flat, snug to the skull, so I wondered how they could breathe at all.

"I don't understand," Cad collected Starling in his arms to the best of his ability– meaning that the Captain's legs dragged at such depths that water filled his boots and they floated off.

"I'm only just starting to," Pool led the way west.

I gave up on trying to shield them from whatever was next. I hadn't counted on their *keuleug*. I hadn't counted on *any* of this.

Together, we approached one of the beached hulls. Metal ribbons peeling away from the center, which was obscured by grass as high as our waists. Strange crunching noises emanating from the structure, faint, but hurried. As if someone were walking over rocks.

The water grew higher, thicker, and bluer upon every step forward. Our boots squealching against the puddle of slime oozing out of the metal flower as we came to the opening.

Yolk, streaked with oozing, veiny throngs of every color. Crispy black wounds marked the separation point of eggs lasered in half. The shell that remained scattered in glittering shards like remnants of broken, painted glass. The insides of the crushed, scaly shrapnel downy and golden, while the outsides were as layered, iridescent, and brilliant as Pool's.

XG-L slammed their foot down on the upturned end of a halved egg. The CRUNCH this produced was as visceral and wet as snapping bone.

The xeno closed their jaws around an egg as their eyes flicked up to us. Scales spraying out as ichor came oozing down their chin. They stretched out a hand, clutching one half of the obliterated egg. An offer to me.

"No, thanks," I waved weakly. Black threatening to fuzz in around my vision. "I'm full."

Kaysev floated in and out of view as we trudged back to the coupled ships, like those red dustclouds drifting over my vision. The Harmony, the blood-soaked desert of death. The nestbed

of amniotic fluid, the Harmony. The blood of the Oozers, the blood of the Kaleidizens. Eskerell. Eggs. They were defending their eggs. Probably the first of the season.

"--Day and a half…crew…" Starling's voice ebbed in and out, with reality. It seemed the Captain talked in his sleep. "A pleasure for that… hunk of junk…"

Everything snapped to perfect clarity as XG-L clapped a hand on my shoulder. "That lizard really gave him the fight for his life, huh?"

Fuck, I hadn't considered if Starling would remember me attacking him. "Yes," I said. "Maybe, I wouldn't know. We only fought through the other two when he got knocked out."

"You're not too rusty, then?" L chuckled, flicking my ear as they hefted their way up the metal rungs on the side of the Kylix. These continued up to the Harmony, where the hatch was open to receive us.

"Not too rusty," I agreed.

Cadbury and XG-L struggled to pull Starling up, but settled on holding him by the collar to drag him head-first into the hatch.

Ush and Ant went up, next.

It was nice, at least, to watch Antiope leaving this horrible place. *It's a crime scene,* I reminded myself. *Nothing she hasn't seen before.*

Pool lingered at the bottom of the ladder, in human form. Eyes gliding across the limbs bobbing in the swamp to gaze out at the glinting green cosmopod in the distance. The lights were on, white and incisive against the darkness falling over the planet.

"Are you coming, Translations Officer?"

"I don't deserve that title," Pool said.

"Then we can think up a new one after a good, long sleep," I extended a hand down to the Kaleidizen.

Pool didn't hide their hesitancy. Shifting their boots in the mud a moment before stepping onto the first rung. Clasping my palm with a squeeze.

Together, we put the massacre of Vuzilika behind us. And, for once, regardless of who was behind the wheel, I was glad to enter open orbit.

XG-L barely had to use any fuel to fight free of the swamped planet's gravitational pull. Even lugging the Kylix, the Harmony was a powerhouse. The view of the rushing expanse of space through the circular window next to me was almost dizzying. Vuzilika had long fallen away behind us, a benefit of the galiton drive: We didn't have to orbit around our mistakes for long.

There wasn't a single bolt loosened from turbulence in the Harmony cockpit, no rattling sound emanating from the ionic tank. But, there was also no life to the cabin. No bowls, no crumbs, no teapot. Just the muddy footprints, and dripping ichor, and even that was soon to be a memory. Dexter flitting about our feet with a towel and a bottle of bacteriClean.

Wow, Wirro really had struck it big-time. Colony Dog approved.

The Harmony handled so smoothly, Starling snoozed for almost half an hour in his seat at L's right hand. It was Finn who waked him, crushing a capsule of some kind of yellow liquid over a thick cloth.

"What is that?" Cad asked.

"Diluted ammonium carbonate," Ush answered. "Smelling salts."

Finn only had to waft the cloth under their Captain's nose for Starling to startle awake. Clutching at the armrests of his seat, and rolling his eyes from one person in the cabin to the next

wth varying degrees of recognition. “Where am I?” said Starling. He touched his chest, rubbed the long red welt throbbing over his collarbone. “What happened?”

“I’m not sure, Captain,” said Finn. The first we’d heard from the medic since the cosmopod ambush. They inspected Starling’s wounds with mock confusion. “I’m no expert, but I would say you were attacked by some kind of feral, horned beast.”

XG-L scratched the two gray horns sticking out of their own forward, one large and one small. One dull, and one sharp. “Those Kaleidizens *have* been sprouting spikes this time of yush,” said the xeno. “I mean *year*.”

As they spoke, I looked hard at the window, again. There was just the ocean of black, but, now, I wondered what had been visible back in the swamp. Dozens of cometons across the marshland, through the dense and humid fog. What had Finn seen, or *thought* they’d seen?

What had Dexter?

“I’ll tell you what happened,” said Ant. “Seeing as I was *there*.” She approached Starling’s chair to spin him to face her. Whipping out the hotshot on her hip, to assist the reenactment. “Two Kaleidizens attacked us, out of nowhere. Some kind of stolen cloaking tech. You told me to cover you, so I did.” She nodded at Dexter. “So did your First Mate. He fought bravely against one of the ambushers, but they were regenerating faster than we could take them down.”

Starling cringed at Dexter’s thickly-bandaged arm. Gauze and tape wound around his forearm to keep the bone inside, but not doing much to keep the blood from seeping through. “I see, it all makes sense,” said the Captain. “Dexter went down…”

“Exactly,” Ant confirmed. “That’s when Finn helped them back to the ship while we held them off. By the time we reached you, that blue Kaleid was struggling with you over a blade.

Your head struck the ground, so XG-J intervened and managed to chase off the remaining Kaleidizens. From there, we found XG-L and carried you back to the Harmony."

"Yes," Starling rubbed the large red swelling at the back of his head. "It's coming back…Some of it…" He clapped Antiope's shoulder. "In that case, thanks for the cover, Captain. I couldn't have done it without you."

"Here's one thing that doesn't add up," said Finn. "Why is the xeno carrying Dexter's weapon?"

Oh. In the rush of everything, I hadn't even registered the weight of the hotshot in my hand. "Duh," I said, before I could think better to. "I used it to make steam, so I could cover *your* ass."

"I remember that," said Dexter.

"I remember *something* like that," said Finn. "But you weren't covering for us, you were covering for *yourself*."

I lunged across the room. The seams of my suit tearing and rethreading themselves even as I did. Stopping just short of Finn the Medic to release a hellish, spittle-laced bleat right into their face.

They staggered backward, toward the control panel, before clearing their throat with a strained chuckle. Standing calmly. "Jeez, Adams, have you considered having your pilot neutered?"

XG-L stared down at the steering wheel.

Ant mustered her best prudish Constable voice: "I take great offense to such a vulgar implication, Medic."

At this, Starling whipped his hand across Finn's face. "You heard the lady," he said. "Don't speak ill of her crew. They are *still* our fellow Terrexians."

"They don't look like it!" spat Finn. "I was watching them, Captain! Not fighting, but shooting the shit with those creatures. Standing around. As for whatever happened to you, you need only to follow the evidence." The medic stabbed a finger at me, still lingering by the window.

I wasn't sure what the fuck they could be on about, we were *all* covered in mud, ichor, dingey swamp water, and loose scales. Then, I felt my horns. At once, I pricked my finger on a broken shard of the serrated machete. There was a smattering of metal embedded in my horns.

And, clinging to the metal, flecks of pale flesh and red blood.

Shit.

"That…does bear some consideration?" Starling sat up, shielding his eyes from the fluorescent bulbs above. "Dexter, get the visosnapper and some gloves, will you?"

"What are you doing?" said Ant.

"Capturing photo evidence," said Starling. "It's not that I don't trust you Captain Adams, it's xenos I don't trust."

"Captain–" L interjected from the pilot's seat.

"Mind your position," snapped Starling. "Captains are speaking." He held his head, gingerly touched the throbbing lump. "Everything is such a blur, all I remember is standing, about to strike that lizard, then… This situation requires Central Bureau of Inquiry resources."

"No," Ush said this aloud. The CBI – the silversuits – would shuffle us off to Constable Court faster than one could say 'Not Guilty.' Though 'Impersonation' would be a new charge. I wondered how many more yushes that would add to my sentence. Not that yushes mattered when

one was sentenced to five-lifetimes in a torture chamber. “Isn’t everyone supposed to be assumed innocent until proven guilty?”

“They’re already guilty!” Finn cried. “Xenos are *forbidden* from handling Colony-issued weaponry.”

“So we’re supposed to believe you couldn’t finish your Doctor’s license,” said Ush, “but you’re somehow a master of law?”

Finn blushed. “Watch your mouth, Griever!”

“Look at that pathetic excuse for a cast,” continued the Doctor. “*You* should be forbidden from practicing medicine. Let me guess: Your uncle pulled some strings and made it so you only need two years of school and six months of clerking experience to gain your certification?”

“Take care of that, Adams,” Starling rolled his eyes, waving. “I won’t engage with these jealous accusations.”

“The truth can’t be slapped out of a real scientist’s mouth!” Ush barked. “Is that what your boss used to do to you?” Antiope backed to the corridor at one end of the cabin, where the rest of the Kylix crew pressed in as Starling advanced on Ush. “Explains why your brain is more scrambled than the eggs you crack open.”

“You’re mistaken, Doctor,” said Captain Ren Starling. “I’m not some bread-begger. When you’re born at the top, you never have need to call anyone ‘Boss’ or ‘Captain,’ just ‘Father.’” His glowering gaze snapped up to Ant. “You’d do best to discipline your crew,” Starling snarled, rearing back his arm. “It takes a firm hand–”

I caught his wrist as he moved to slap Ush. Twisted it behind his back with a pronounced and echoing *CRACK*.

Starling howled, kicking like a spooked cometcow until I released him. Freed and feral, his hand limp and losing color, fast. Draining from a glowing tan, to a dull blue. “TREASON!”

“Relax, Starling,” the First Mate–Dexter–said. “They’re just looking after their own.”

XG-L only glanced at the action, training their gaze on the steering wheel, the windshield before it.

Starling flew into an all-out tantrum, clobbering Dexter’s head and chest like a primate who had never been civilized at all, a galaxy-trekking gorilla of some kind. Blood dribbled out of Dexter’s torn lip. Joined the droplets of spittle as he coughed, heaving and retching til vomit, at last, oozed down his chin, onto the steel floor.

I didn’t need to ask to know this was no one-time occurrence. Not a man pushed to the brink, but a man who lived there full-time.

“Please, Captain…” Dexter weezed, hugging his side.

The Medic bolted upright. Knelt even as the hand-print on their cheek swelled. “It’s his rib. Let me take some X-rays.”

“You can take him to his module, and nowhere else,” Starling spat, straightening his uniform. “The First Mate is just being dramatic.” He snatched a cloth out of a drawer. Dried his hands of the residual snot and blood splatter. “Well? Someone take care of this mess.”

The Medic–Finn–nodded, struggling to drag a nearly-unconscious, sputtering Dexter out of the cockpit, and into the hall.

Starling called after them. “And when you get back, I expect you to have a full treatment kit for my hand.”

Finn huffed, resting a moment before pulling with their hands hooked under Dexter’s arms. “Yes…Captain…”

"Should I assist them, sir?" XG-L piped up, from behind the steering wheel.

"NO!" Starling pounded on the dashboard, then cried out when his hand throbbed. "No, I need you with me, XG-L. I'm starting to wonder what kind of company we find ourselves in."

"Decent company," I shot back. "You're fucking sick, dude."

Ush nodded, though their lip trembled and I noted shades of familiarity in their eyes. Touchy patients, aggressive Colony men, nothing new for the Doctor. "I concur," said Ush. "Diagnosis: Off the deep end."

Starling gestured wildly to Antiope, who's shoulders brushed past mine and Cad's as she stepped behind us. "Is this kind of traitorous babble just par for the course under your leadership."

Ant stammered, her voice choking off as if someone were tearing those badges off of her suit and stuffing them into her mouth. I answered for her. "No," I said. "But it *is* under mine."

"What the hell are you on about?" Starling stalked nearer.

Antiope gripped my shoulder. Hugged herself to me from behind so she could whisper in my ear. "I'm sorry, Jean."

"It's okay," I said, softly. "It's going to be okay."

Pool turned the dial of the watch on their wrist. "If we're airing out our grievances, I might as well get comfortable." They exploded into Kaleidizen form. Head shooting up toward the ceiling while those spikes surged out of their shoulders, their forearms. "Ahhhh, that is so much better."

Starling looked to XG-L, as if they might be able to explain any Unhuman Activity. XG-L shrugged, tried to sink lower in their seat, but Starling grabbed them by the suit, and threw them into the space between us. "Keep that thing *away* from me."

"Right," Pool mused. "Because you're only comfortable destroying defenseless eggs."

Finn the Medic hustled into the cockpit with a medical kit that they promptly dropped. Gauze unfurling from the roll so a black, cloth line was drawn between the crew of the Kylix, and that of the Harmony–those that remained, anyway. Dexter still whimpering in his sleepmodule, no doubt. XG-L, Finn, and Captain Ren Starling staring us down.

Starling only addressed Antiope, "Adams, because of your breeding, I trust there's a perfectly reasonable explanation for this."

We looked around at each other. With a wash and a half's travel with the galiton-drive, we were already mere aurons away from the Caniscen. Without it, though, it would be washes–maybe even a septur–more. "Cad," I said.

He reached into his toolbelt, and brandished a screwdriver. "It might take some time."

Starling looked between us. "Adams?"

"We can buy time," said Ush. Reaching into the pocket of their labcoat and withdrawing a handful of steel ingots. Tendon's treats.

Starling rested a hand on the handle of his hotshot, holstered on his hip. Antiope drew hers at the same time. Perks of being underestimated, no one ever expected you to outdraw them. "What is the *meaning* of this, Adams?"

As if in answer, the visojecter blinked to life. A sheet of opaque holographic blue jetting out of the little light along the control panel. Expanding into an image, the glowing grid wrapping around the open air to form a body first, and a face second. My face.

In the hologram, I sported a faint, blue glow. My eyes deep indigo instead of black-brown as they gazed down, as if peering past the rectangular screen.

This was no regular message. The name of the sender didn't flash over the hologram. Instead, a robotic, monotonous voice called up from the visojector: "ARIES KNOWS NOTHING, TERREX KNOWS TOO MUCH…ARIES KNOWS NOTHING, TERREX KNOWS TOO MUCH…" The voice blared on as the image grew to full size. As if another me had sprung up right there on the dashboard. Though a hand entered the scope as it rubbed the sensitive base of my horns. Now, the sound flickered into existence. Not just whirring up from the little speaker under the visojecter, but streaming in from the intercom: My contented humming.

Below me, out of frame, my lover gave several sweet sighing rasps as I rode her. No less adorable as a recording. When she leaned in to kiss me between the brow, the camera–if you could call it a camera–drew in on my eyes. "*Look around, you've lived in the Kylix the last five years*." The reflection in them. Warped and watery, but–as the lens focused in on the image to block all else out–unmistakably, Antiope Adams. "*It doesn't take much to satisfy you*."

Just as in real-time, washes ago, all was quiet save for our labored thrusting. My impassioned, appreciative groans. For fuck's sake, even every bead of sweat, every pleasure-drawn tear, was present in the recreation. Unless it was no recreation. But how could anyone have recorded that? It'd been just me and Ant. Us in the sleepmodule, just how Ush preferred, our intimate life shut out from everyone else by a soundproof hatch.

XG-L's wild eyes locked with me. They stumbled backward, catching themself on the control panel. Finn didn't seem so much appalled as confused, gaping at the image as if trying to work out the biology of it. Xenos were expressly forbidden from sharing quarters with humans outside of work aurons, so I wouldn't be surprised if they'd never seen one naked. Had been fed

myths about our twisted, mutant nature. Wolfthrop having wrought thorned, grotesque, senseless beasts in their labs that could only tap into their capability for pleasure by instilling pain.

Starling's one working hand balled into a fist, while his other flopped frantically. He watched the hologram like a disaster unfolding before him. Yanking at his hair as Antiope's blue double closed her lips around my throat. As the digital me squeezed Ant's tits, craned to take her nipple into my mouth.

Antiope's eyes welled, all of her shaking so violently I thought she might be having a seizure. "How could this…? *That voice…* Who could've…?"

Ush steadied her on her feet, hissing, "It's not your shame."

Ant held her head, swayed. "What do you mean?"

"When you're being watched," said Usher. "The embarrassment lies with the surveillor, not the surveilled."

Still. It just had to be this one. Of all the violations, it had to be this one. Antiope so vulnerable and beautiful in my arms, trusting me with her body for the first time. There was just that extra level of intrusion. As if someone had gone out of the way to make a mockery of that drain, of our love. Reflecting it back at us to try to make it dirty, but the rage that boiled in me, now, wasn't in shame. Ush was right, we hadn't done anything wrong. In fact, I was more proud of Antiope and the crew than ever.

"Um," Cad fidgetted as the holographic figures kissed one final time, and the image retracted into the visojecter. "That's just how Grievers say 'Hello?'" He said it like a question, testing the waters. No such luck, the Harmony crew still reeling, splayed out over their chairs and dashboard.

Starling composed himself just well enough to take XG-L's suit into his trembling fists. "END THIS, AT ONCE!" Starling threw XG-L over the black line. Onto the side of the Kylix crew.

Nelson shuffled in place, Garfield's disapproving eyes sweeping over everyone's tense and snarling face from his slippers. "Captain?"

"The drive," I said. "Now, please."

Cad hesitated. "It doesn't have to be like this," he spread his arms out in front of me, whirling to stare L down. "I know that recording was *shocking*, but you and Jean are old friends. If you just drop us off–"

"Don't you listen to that *thing*!" Starling called, clutching his hand to his chest. "I'll have everyone in this ship branded for high treason and sent to the correctionBelt if I have to repeat myself. Now, *end this nonsense*."

XG-L gulped once, hard. A low whimper eked out of their throat. "I'm sorry, Jay," they readied to lunge. Aiming those horns right at Cadbury's throat. "I'm just following orders."

Pool cried out as I slid between Nelson's legs to catch XG-L's horns in my own, curled around their longest one. I only had to twist my head to snap their horn clean off. Hot, red blood pulsed down the remains of the cartilege. Down my face, clouding my vision so I could only turn in the First Mate's general direction. "CAD?"

"I'm on it, Captain!" he huffed, feeling his neck for a phantom wound before jogging off to the tail of the ship.

"It's on then!" Ush wrenched the blood-soaked hotshot out of my hand to whip it across XG-L's head. Turning the barrel on Finn.

When it kicked back in her arms, the butt slammed into Usher's forehead.

The off-kilter red laser blasted through the control panel as Finn rolled to avoid a headshot.

"There goes all that fancy wiring," I gritted as L and I tumbled over each other. Claw over knee. Foot over fist. Tail over horn. All the while, their fangs sinking into my shoulders, my arm. I just had to keep them away from my throat and chest.

I stuck my arms straight out to hold them by the shoulders as they snarled and snapped. My elbows buckling. I continued, if only to keep my mind off the stabbing pain in my side, head, and biceps, "Cad'll be devastated, really."

"I had a good thing going, Jay," L panted, slashing at my face. "Just because you don't know your place–" They took a handful of my twists, and slammed my head into the edge of the wall. The metal dented upon impact with my skull, black spots blooming across my vision.

In the struggle, their tail was freed. Hanging bushy and low out of their suit. I grabbed it, yanked it so hard I winced, myself. "Won't let someone put me in it, more like."

Finn and Usher tripped over us. The Harmony medic landing on top of Doctor Lugomir. Fingernails loosing as they clawed for the handle of the hotshot. "I may not be a six-year certified doctor," they produced a scalpel from their labcoat, "but I still know how to cut people open."

Usher kicked as the scalpel pierced through her pantleg, and sliced a long, gushing incision into her thigh. "*FUCK!*" The Doctor used her own blood to slide out from under Finn. Digging around in her own labcoat as Finn got to their feet. Standing over her with a look that resembled hunger lurking behind their eyes. "I'd be really pissed right now if it wasn't for the unavoidable truth that *doctors don't die*." Ush lobbed one of those silver ingots at Finn's head.

The Medic collapsed, a dent in their skull, blood dribbling out of their ears. At first, they seized on the marble flooring. Then, they gave great gulping gasps. Then, Finn was the least of our worries.

Ush tried to repeat this attack, but Starling had caught on. Drawing his hotshot in a flash of metal. He loosed a volley of lasers at Ush, but Pool leapt out in front of them. Took the blows as easily as some take a shower. Until the charge gave, and the gun jammed.

There was a buzzing noise, a flash of red light, and Starling's sole remaining functional hand had a giant, charred hole lasered through it.

"*DADDY!*" The Constable howled. Thick, red blood surging out of the wound. His hotshot clattered to the floor.

"Not bad for a nepotism hire," I called as Antiope holstered her smoking hotshot.

"Starshine," she winked. "You've got no idea."

XG-L yowled as I renewed my pull on their tail, but only let up long enough for me to slip out from under them.

L grabbed my ankle, and dragged me back with so much strength I gasped. "You think you're too good for your own kind?" We grappled, XG-L locking a hand around one of my horns and giving the base a long, slow stroke. "You think a human can satisfy you?" A fresh, sharp surge of pain emanated from my left ear as L took a bite out of it. Swallowed my flesh. "You're an animal to her, *Jean*. She'll treat you like one the second your little pleasure cruise encounters some turbulence."

Captain Ren Starling wasn't done.

This much was apparent when he rolled over in the smattering of hand bones he'd passed out in to feel around for his gun. His gaze distant, but no less hateful.

Pool slid on the slurry of blood and vomit as they sprinted across the cockpit to kick Starling's hotshot. It skidded to the mouth of the corridor. Bouncing off of Cadbury's boots as he bounded into the cabin, clutching a gleaming hunk of metal. A series of wires, tubes, and vents winding around the core of the head-sized galiton-drive. "We're in for one hell of an upgrade– WHOA!"

While XG-L was distracted by the entrance, I scrambled onto the control panel.

This was a vantage point I'd never enjoyed, my boots smashing every ship and life support control in one footstep. This did nothing, though, in the locked autopilot mode. The wheel turning gingerly to guide us around the more obvious of crashable objects.

"Running again?" XG-L snorted. "Standing up there just makes you look like more of a runt."

"Let me sink to your level, then," I dove from the dashboard, head-first.

My horns sank into XG-L's chest cavity with a wet, muffled crack, and the xenogene went slack. Their hot blood pulsing over my horns, washing down my face. Into my mouth.

I didn't hesitate to swallow.

Starling grappled with Antiope, pulling at her holstered hotshot. "That's enough of this, Adams," he gargled. "Since you don't have the good Terran sense to put an end to this, I will."

"Get your hands off of her!" Cadbury had a tenuous grip on Starling's dripping hotshot, and not just because he was balancing the galiton-drive in the other arm. Nelson held it so only his fingertips touched the weapon, as if allowing his palm to touch the handle would cross some line he wasn't ready to. "I don't want to use this, but I will if you threaten my crew!"

"You don't know *how* to use that," Starling corrected him, spinning on his heels to creep closer to Cad. Goading, pulling faces, taking on a sing-songy, mocking tone. "Go ahead, shoot me, since you think you're some kind of big man!"

"I'm not a big man," Nelson's voice was even. "Nor am I holy Yuh Zuh. I'm just some guy from the Kepler valley." The First Mate knelt to set the gun at his feet, once more. "That's why it can't be my decision to end your existence. That power is beyond me."

"You speak like a holy man, but you fraternize with xenophiles," Starling spat on Cadbury's spacesuit.

Nelson didn't so much as wince. "If we give you your life, will you let us leave in peace?"

"You don't get it, do you, valley boy?" Even in his sorry state, with a charred hole in his hand, vomit running down his chin, and his own bone shards sticking to the front of that spotless golden spacesuit, Ren Starling managed to sound condescending. He paced with his hands behind his back, as if giving a mission briefing. "Every piece of legislation allowing you an arm, leg, neck, or dick isn't *won* by you, it's *allowed* by *us*. Every lungful of oxygen you scrappy faggots take is *thanks to me*. You won't be *giving* me anything, if you let me live."

Cadbury slammed the blunt, steel end of the galiton-drive into Ren Starling's cranium. Which caved in, squeezing pink ooze out of the edge of the jagged wound like toothpaste. "Just be grateful, next time, you cunt!"

Starling's brains continued to unravel on the floor, in various shades of soupy grey, puss-like white, and pulsing pink. His breathing ebbed in and out for minutes, Nelson standing over him until the Captain's chest rose no more. Indeed, Starling exhaled blood, now.

In the piercing silence that followed, the faint squeal of hinges seemed to scream through the cabin.

Ant startled at the sound, rushing to my side to hug my shoulder. “It’s okay,” I said. “He’s not in fighting shape.”

Dexter groaned down the corridor, hugging his side, and looking more extraterrestrial than Terran with his greening complexion. Everyone watched as the First Mate of the Harmony limped to the mouth of the hall, and gazed down at Ren Starling’s crumpled remains.

With a pained grunt, Dexter reared back his foot and kicked Starling square in the head. “I’ve been wanting to do that for years.” He looked up at Ant. “I didn’t get to bring any cotton blankets from Earth because Starling always insisted he needed all the closet-space.”

“That tracks,” I said.

“You’re not going to give us any problems, are you?” Antiope asked.

Dexter chuckled, then groaned, doubling over to clutch his ribs. “Not in this state,” he said. “No, I don’t care much. This was only a job to me, a way to get out and see the universe…” He laughed and winced again.

“Would you like me to take a look at you?” Ush started toward him, but he waved her off.

“Thanks, Doctor, but it’s really just this soreness. Bruised a rib, I think. Not broken.” He huffed. “I’m in horrible pain, but I’ll live. The escape-pod is programmed to lull escapees into deep slumber. I’ll wake up on Earth in a few days, be with my family. Stay on Earth, and stay with them.”

“Still,” Ush reached into her labcoat. “You shouldn’t suffer in the meantime.” Produced a square metal tin from some pocket I’d never noticed before. When she pried the tiny lid off,

there were small white capsules inside. Ush handed a couple of the pills to Dexter. “They’re fast-acting, if you bite down before you swallow.”

Dexter didn’t waste time downing one, popping a white pill into his mouth and gulping. “You’re a credit to the League.” He nodded at each of us, in turn. “You’re all okay. I know whatever you’re up to, it’s nothing cruel. None of my concern. The Colonies won’t hear a peep out of–” Dexter’s face grew red, then blue, then purple. The veins in his neck grew as thick and defined as cords as he coughed. His throat growing drier with each hacking whoop, mucus sliming up and out as frothing, white bubbles.

Dexter died slowly.

Stumbing to the wall to steady himself, tripping over his own crewmates. He sat, resigned to reaching out to us with splayed fingers and no words. Anyone could tell he understood what was happening before his eyes grew glazed. But no one protested until he was dead.

“Usher,” Pool strode over to Cadbury. They didn’t hug him, but buried their snout into Cad’s neck, nuzzling. Smearing Cad’s spotless collar with blood. “Why do you carry cyanide pills in a mint tin?”

“Because I’m not going to jail over this,” said the Doctor. For now, no one pushed back.

Pool turning their attention to the First Mate, “I’m so glad you’re okay.”

“Of course I am,” Cad pulled back, gingerly grasping Pool’s shoulders to look into all three sets of their eyes, one by one. Finally, the First Mate looked past Pool at the carnage. “I guess we can’t say the same for the decor.” He gasped at the sight of the sizzling, melted dashboard. “That was a *vintage* chromoly finish!”

"Yes," said Pool. "It was." The Translations Officer tipped their snout down in a way I didn't recognize, at first, because I'd never seen a Kaleidizen indulge in such a human custom as kissing.

It took Cad a moment too, frowning when he understood. "Are you sure?" he said. "I mean, I know your old friend's been on your mind…"

"Kemi is dead," said Pool. "She's dead, and I loved her. You're alive, and I…I, well–I feel how I feel about you."

These words took the air out of the cockpit faster and more efficiently than any airlock could've. "I feel how I feel about you, too, Pool." Cad met their snout with his lips. Their scales with his skin. Their spikes with his tender, probing hands. The two crewmates winding so tightly I felt compelled to gaze at the floor a moment before Ush interrupted.

"Took you long enough," she grumbled as they separated.

I patted Cad's shoulder. "Great work, First Mate Cadbury. Let's, uh, install the drive and clean up below. I'll start the craft, and we'll be rid of this mess. Leave it behind."

"The sooner, the better," Pool urged. "Someone must know we're aboard if they sent that message."

"No," Antiope said, without hesitation. "That wasn't a sign someone knows we're here, it was a sign someone is watching us. *Has been* watching us. And he doesn't like what he sees." She reached for the middle dial of the radio, and a quilt of chatter erupted from the intercom. Ant lingering between stations so the voices spoke over each other: "*Word of a spontaneous broadcoast….Mysterious Origin…Deadname Adams, problemchild of the Secretary…Affair…Affair…Affair with a xenogene….*"

I looked at my hand, then. A reflex I'd grown out of since my Wolfthrop washes. The twice-healed scar, slightly raised and slightly darker than the rest of my palm. One neat line, then a frenzied, sketchy one obscuring most of it. The insertion, then my harried removal just after stealing the Kylix.

Every xenogene had a chip installed, to monitor our health, sure, but mostly our location. Aries protecting his investment. "You're his daughter," I said, as if that was the end of the conversation.

Antiope looked to the still-glowing dot on the dashboard. The visojecter. "I didn't believe it, either, but that's the only way any of this makes sense. Just another piece of property, another planetary body to keep under control."

"But that message," said Cad. "*Aries knows nothing…*"

"That would be an excellent diversion," Pool noted. "Denial before anyone has a chance to accuse."

"And, even if he didn't do this," said Ant, "he *did* put this chip in me. He's the only one who could have."

Ush shook her head furiously. "Nonconsensual chipping is a galactic offense in the Colony courts."

"Who controls the courts?" Ant replied. "And, even then, those laws don't apply to…Apply to children…" Her knees buckled, but she didn't fall. The stony expression gracing her features now, though, was just as concerning. "This explains why the hologram was from my perspective, and how Artemis knew I left the Undergal immediately."

Pool put an arm around Cad's shoulders. Looked to Ant. "So Aries has some kind of tracker in you, somewhere?"

"Not just somewhere," Ush chimed in, whipping a flashlight out of her labcoat to shine it into Antiope's eyes. "If the device is transmitting from somewhere with access to your sight, your memories, then there's only one place a chip could be: Your brain."

Ant nodded, just once. Sweat rolling down her pulsing temple, her flushing face. "The suits," she said, at last, turning to me. "Captain, you'll want their suits. Olivia Crest recommends confiscating identifying clothing before disposing of a corpse."

"Ant?" My words were too soft and tremulous on my own ears. Antiope outright winced at the tone. There was no straining the pity or fear surging through me.

"We'll need to collect scales, too, before leaving," she said. "I'm the last person Starling was seen speaking to in public, now the Harmony and my tracker are transponding from the same location he went dark in. The engine could work in our favor, but taking any cash would give us away."

"Scales?" said Pool, though the question was just a courtesy. We all knew what Ant was saying. What we needed to do.

Orbitters had no fool-proof alibi, we were already starting with negative trust built, years of criminal records. People like Starling didn't have records of violence, just those allegations simmering under the surface. Those he only showed the charming side to would be in denial. Eventually, his family would come snooping around for the truth, or whatever truth we manufactured.

"From the floor," said Antiope. "We're abandoning his ship within planeons on Vuzilika, it wouldn't be the biggest leap in logic for whoever finds it to assume Kaleidizens were involved."

Pool looked to me. All six eyes wide, probing, and accusing. “Would we frame other Grievers, Captain?” they said. “In the same situation, would you throw innocent, mourning, bleeding humans under the ship to save your own tail?”

“To save my own tail,” I said, “maybe.” I didn’t order my mouth to move, it just did. The words hollow, and faraway. Growing more distant on my ears as my stomach threatened to greet the floor. “To save my crew, yes.”

“I’LL KILL HIM! I’LL KILL HIM!” My horn lodged in the corridor wall of the Kylix. Followed by my first, tearing the hole wider. The sick sound of twisting metal, matching the horrible wrenching in my stomach.

Cad rubbed my back as I retched. Lost my most recent serving of nutrisoup, peas and rice twice liquified in the chunky puddle between my feet. More, still, on the way. Surging up my throat. Bloating my cheeks. I tried to force it down, but there was no use. I was too weak.

“Let it out, Jean,” Cad soothed. “Into a bucket, if you can. Pool, can you–?”

Pool took his place, rubbing my back. Massaging my shoulders as Cad stepped away. “I’ve got them,” said the translator. “The bucket should be by the mop, I think we’ll need that, too.”

“We might still have Puke Powder,” Cad called, trotting further down the hall to throw the closet open. Root around as handles clattered. “Yep, just a sprinkle should do…There’s Nause-B-Gone, too.”

“I think that’s for pregnancy,” said Pool. “Why do we have that? Was anyone ever pregnant onboard?”

"Confidential information, as per our yushly health contract," Ush emerged from her lab. She removed her gloves to tuck into her labcoat. Tried to chuckle, but the sound died off like a croak in her throat.

"Just say it," I said, my teeth gritted. My gums throbbing because of it, but I couldn't unclench. Had to brace myself. "It's bad, isn't it?"

"Yeah," said Ush. "It's bad." She pulled a translucent tube out of her waistband. Unfurled it, and held it to the light. It was an X-ray of Antiope's upper body. Though the only thing anyone's eyes would've been drawn to was the spider-like webbing of silver twine-wire through my fiance's brain. At the center, a single square blip. The chip, and an entire surveillance system plugged into it. Threading through Antiope's pale, spongey brain on the X-ray like a needle-thin, infinitely long snake trying to choke the life out of its prey.

I wailed as Cad sprinkled Puke Powder over my vomit. Waited for the liquid to solidify. Mopped it toward the utility closet. "How–I don't–"

Tendon came scuttling out of the recesses of the ship. It cawwed up at Ush, who offered it a steel ingot. Tendon swallowed it, but begged more, wriggling that long, bristled body in a dance of desperation. Or greed, more like. Ush emptied her pockets, stroking the crowcat's long body as it ceased its begging to bound away.

"Little parasite," Pool shook their head after it, squeezing me around the waist. "Everything's going to be all right."

"It's not," I said. "STOP LYING!" Wheeling, I sunk my fist into the wall, again. Metal-plating peeling off in my fingers.

Cad stowwed the mop, pulling several tall sheets of metal of the closet, along with his welding kit. “You don’t have to hold back, Jean,” he said. “Destroy whatever you like, and I’ll make it all better.”

“It’s just not fair,” I rammed into the wall again. Liking the crunch and jolt that followed each blow. A *satisfying* sound to accompany the action. “She’ll die, won’t she?”

Ush rolled up the X-ray. “If we operate, yes, it’s likely.” She cleared her throat, but Cad and Pool only edged in closer. “Did you…want to discuss this in private?”

“Suspense is so cruel,” I thumped the wall, again. My fist sinking into it. “Just tell me, now, Ush. With everyone here. Everyone, but–” A wave of lightheadedness rolled over me, and I leaned on Cad’s shoulder. “*Please*, just tell me.”

Ush nodded slowly. “Okay,” she said. “I’m sure you can tell from the examination photo, but the chip is embedded in the center of her brain. It’s possible to coax it to just above the stem, but…Well, that’s an entire operation of its own. These are dual-purpose. Some are minutely finer than others, likely receptors, the thicker ones are probably emitting low doses of some kind of influential liquid. Perhaps a numbing agent, while they deliver electric pulses–Low voltage!” She added, quickly, watching my face. “Open brain surgery isn’t my specialty, and it’s extremely risky, but if we’re being watched, that’s the culprit, all right.”

“Okay,” I inhaled. “Then you won’t operate. We’ll work around it.”

“That’s, uh, not your decision to make,” Ush said it carefully. “Antiope’s already decided to go ahead with the procedure. She–She sent me out here so you could go in, say…say whatever you need to say.”

A bleat tore through my teeth. “That spoiled–spoiled, arrogant–” I thrashed the wall. “Yeah, I’ll go in there, all right. And change her mind, that’s what I’ll do!”

"Jean–" Cad clasped my arm, but I shook him off more violently than I needed to. Twisting and wheeling to face him. My breath coming hot and haggard. "I just want you to remember your own advice. You know…" He stepped closer, lowering his voice so Ush and Pool couldn't hear. "About saying regrettable things."

"This is a little different than *that*, Cad," I said in a more even tone.

"Yeah," shrugged Cad. "But, I just mean, if her head's already not in the right place, the last thing she wants is you barging in to shout down her decisions."

At this, I nodded. "You're right," I said. I had to be tactful, gentle. Not for my sake, but for Antiope's. Cad opened his arms, so I stepped into them. Let him give me one of those tight, meaningful hugs only Cad could give. "I love you, Cad."

"It's going to be okay, Jean," he released me. Swiped his thumb across my face to clear the latest spilled tears. "I love you, we all do. We're here for you, understand?"

I nodded. "Thank you." Turned to stride deeper into the corridor. Shaky on my feet, at first, but steadier as I neared Ush's lab. Opened the door, and stepped inside.

Usher's laboratory was the most organized room I'd ever been inside. There was an assortment of medicines inside rows of recessed, shut drawers and cabinets, labelled by use and illness: *Dizziness, Internal Pain, External Pain, Menstrual Cramps, Casual Cramps, Cyano Sickness, Immune System Support, Cough,* and, at last, *MAJOR SURGERY REQUIRED*. This drawer was opened, and empty. Several sharp, metal instruments were on a silver tray beside the examination chair.

Upholstered in comfortable leather, and reclined so I couldn't see Antiope's face. Just her hands above her, fiddling with one of the incision tools. Sharp, and serrated, like a torture device instead of something meant to fix someone up. Make them well and healthy.

I pretended to be interested in the bacteria under a microscope anchored to the counter so it wouldn't break during turbulence, while Ant pulled a lever, snapped the chair upright into sitting position. "Hey."

"Hey," I said. Strolling around the chair, hands in my spacesuit pockets. Above the exam chair, heavy, metal equipment hung from a sturdy heavy-duty pulley system. Pushed off to the side so it didn't hover over Ant in the chair, now, though I knew it could be pulled down. That one had to wear protective gear, the vest hanging on a hook behind the seat, before any pictures could be taken. "I saw your X-ray."

"Don't, Jean–"

"Why?" so much for the tactful approach. "Because this *only* involves you?"

Ant threw up her hands, dropping the serrated instrument with a metal chime against the floor. "What other choice is there? Risk my Dad blowing this entire mission?" She bolted to her feet, and shouted. Actually shouted, voice lashing across the sterile lab, "Risk my Dad lurking behind my eyes every time we get into bed?!" Now, it was Antiope's turn to clobber the wall. She kicked it, at first, then winced. "Ouch!" Punched it, harder, harder. Her knuckles bruising over purple. That skin scraping against the metal until her fists were bleeding.

"Ant, stop!" Usually, I'd never use my strength against her, but this was for her own protection. I picked her up. Meant to carry her back to the exam chair, but couldn't bring myself to put her down. "I'm sorry, but you're hurting yourself…"

Antiope sobbed into my suit a moment. Not saying anything. I let her, until her tears ran dry. Then, she spoke, her voice hoarse and dead serious. "I'll kill him. I swear to you, Jean, he'll wish he never split his sperm three ways. Just the two: Artemis and Apollo. He's going to regret giving me life."

First the wall-brutalizing, now this. “Then we’re more alike than I thought.”

Antiope chuckled. Curled against me, still. Heat radiating off of her, the kind of feverish, jittery heat that only rolls off of the mega pissed. “I never thought we were so different to begin with.” A beat, just the whir of the exhaust fan overhead.

“I really want to kiss you, now,” I said. “If this was different, I mean, that’s what I’d do.”

Ant’s reply was too quick, as if she’d rehearsed it before I’d come in. “You still love me?” she said, blushing. “Even though I acted like a jerk the other night?”

“I do,” I said. Then I asked her something I’d been considering. “Would you prefer it if I had my horns removed?” I wasn’t sure of a particular way to achieve this, but Ush was the most skilled medical professional I knew.

Ant all-out balked at this. “What? No, that was just Artemis getting to my head…Your face was like a stranger’s then, and everything was so confusing. Just because *I* feel like a traitor, sometimes, doesn’t mean I get to say things that make you feel like that, Jean.” She didn’t have to clarify what ‘like that’ meant. Ugly, and horrifying. Ant reached out, now, to stroke my horns. Fingers tracing the curves to linger at the base.

“Not here, moonlight,” I noted, quick. Ush would be scandalized, and I’d been friends with the Doctor long enough to gather any funny businessess in the lab was a no-go.

Ant dropped her arm around my shoulders. Held onto me as I stood. “You know,” she said. “On Earth, carrying someone like this is called ‘Bridal style.’”

“Okay…” I said, because I didn’t know what a bride was. Luckily, Ant elaborated.

“It’s tradition for a husband to carry the bride over the threshold–that means the doorway–of their home when they get back from the wedding. That’s how you know the honeymoon is started.”

"Husband?" I said. "Honeymoon? Is that in our Solar System?"

"Forget it, Jean," said Antiope. "It's just a Terran thing." She gently pinched the tip of my ear, and folded the fuzzy, flexible cone down to whisper, "I was trying to tell you to take me to your module. It's been a long day, and there's no need to do all this tonight after the Harmony disaster."

"Here, here," I agreed. And was glad to leave all the sharp tools and heavy machinery behind. Hustling Ant off into the corridor. Where Cad had seamlessly welded two entirely new sheets of metal into place where the damaged ones once were. "Nelson's an artist. I've got to thank him later."

For now, though, the hall was empty. There weren't any sounds echoing out of the cockpit, either. Meaning everyone had turned in for bed.

Ant said, "I suppose apologies are in order. Your crew was gracious enough to let me move in, and I repaid them by violating their privacy."

"You don't need to apologize for anything," I found the hatch. Ant drew it open, and I helped her inside. Climbed in after her, and said the thing I'd been dwelling on since anyone suggested a chip. "I just can't believe your Dad would…"

"Neither can I," said Ant. "Actually, yes I can, but I'd like to not believe it, you know?"

I supposed I did, but from the way she described being 'parented,' I could tell Ant and I had had very different upbringings. In the late twenty-first century, single parent and three-plus parent conception was invented, perfected by the time Aries was considering the procedure. No other human parent in sight. The birth carried out through the same process that produced us xenos on Wolfthrop: Indivitro pods modified with donated–or otherwise procured–human organs.

The gestation was the same length, but now parents could watch their little bundle of cells develop through transparent silicone walls. A thing Antiope had recalled more than once that Aries did with great love and gusto. Her earliest memories were of his beaming face. That was the strangest part.

On Wolfthrop, a cacophony of amped-up otherness coursing through our helixes, there was no such thing as parents. We fought and killed each other at leisure, had to train ourselves to walk, picked up words from the instructors, the dirty ones first, then the rest. But outside of tracking our location to make sure we were still in the joint, no one 'watched' us. Our performance was monitored on a health, aggression, and piloting level, but class was out of session more often than in, and only began when we were fifteen. Those first yushes, we were feral.

On Earth, in contrast, Aries hovered over Antiope like a human cosmocraft. He was strict and watchful over all three of his children: Artemis, Antiope's older sister by nine yushes, and their younger brother, Apollo, who was only just joining the Envoy expeditions at eighteen. As kids, they suffered through a constant barrage of Adams' curated activities like piano lessons, tennis lessons, and courses in some language called French.

"I get it," I lied. Thinking for a moment. Maybe I did, in a way, but from my secondary understanding gleaned from Ush and Cad, parents were usually repulsed by the very notion of their offspring getting it on. "He did this because he hates me, didn't he? Hates *us*?"

Ant nodded. "He's always been a prude, and old-fashioned, but 'public humiliation?'" She whistled low under her breath. "It's a new low. Sure, he always tried to set me up with Colony noblemen, the esteemed Zach Hatchett, but I always thought he'd, at least, respect my real inclination when I told him…not to mention my privacy." She flopped onto her back. Stared

up at the roof of the module as if to see clean through it, into the cosmos. “So back on Proxtauri…”

A chill ran up my spine just thinking of it. My tail wandered to Antiope’s ankle, winded around her calf. She shivered. “That was a fun night,” I said. “I’d never kissed a human before.” I eased my hand over Ant’s navel. Just those soft, downy curls instead of the coarse hair that seemed to sprout from my every pore.

“I’d *only* kissed humans,” Ant rolled over to hug me around the chest. “Only *met* humans, really. Until my old Pilot XG-A.” She fixed her black eyes on mine. “Back on Earth, a white human can go their whole life without meeting a black human by name.”

An exclamation point and a question mark fought for control of my mouth. “What–Huh?”

“It’s crazy,” Ant confirmed. “I know, it sounds so stupid.”

“So Terrans color-code,” I said, trying to squeeze the tidbit into the cracks of what I knew already. “That explains why tourist groups are usually white.”

Ant nodded. “Black humans typically never leave Earth. They can’t afford to miss a shift, that’s what Dad always said. He takes history seriously.”

“That,” I said. “Or he just likes bragging about the Phoenix Act.”

Ant chuckled, “It could be that.” She shifted her gaze to the steel ceiling, the muted yellow light. Reaching out to it to let her hand become engulfed in gold. “In his biography, Dad goes on and on about how important seeing thriving other-worlds was for him to realize humans were screwing ourselves by limiting our range to just Earth. To just the Milky Way. But I–” Pearly tears rolled down her nose. Collecting at the tip.

“Ant?”

She spoke through the tears, swallowing them. “I’ve seen the world, Dad saw to that. Every canyon and pyramid and mountain and statue. When we toured space, just before my deployment, I saw every inch of the Colonies. But with Dad always breathing down my neck, and Art when he wasn’t around to, I feel like I haven’t seen anything at all. Not yet. I haven’t *lived* yet.”

“You’re only twenty-five,” I nuzzled her wet cheeks with the tip of my own nose. Lapped up a few stray drops at the edge of her nostril. Her tears were salty, and carried the faint flowery flavor of some soap she must’ve brought aboard. “Of course you haven’t lived, yet. Ten years ago, Aries was sixty-something. Ten years ago, you were *fifteen*.”

She gave an actual gail of laughter at this, and didn’t hide her rolling eyes. “Not like *that*, Jean,” she said. “I meant like, the way he hovered over me all the time, like a dragoon with me in the spotlight. Most of the time, when someone gets their mandatory Terrex Defense Forces draft, they ask their parents to help them wiggle out of it. But I didn’t care if I saw battle or was met with uncooperative extraterrestials, when I got my draft card, I was *relieved*. I was at that Die-In to celebrate my first placement–”

“Hurklid,” I remembered. A quiet moon settlement a few planetons from Proxtauri. “Kind of a morbid day to celebrate anything.”

Ant gave a dark and forceful chuckle, looking past me, seemingly through the ship. All the way through space, back to that day. “That’s the power of ignorance and determination,” she shook her head. “I used to want a promotion to a city-post more than anything, but I think a part of me knew it wouldn’t last. Was already mourning it, mourning me.”

I kissed her neck. “Then you really *are* a Griever.”

When Ant's eyes snapped to mine, pearly drops spilled from them. She grinned through them, though. "When we used to watch the news back on Earth, I always wondered what traits made for a runner. That's what they call anyone who abandons their job, at least when they're not calling them a coward. When we held hands that night, I understood completely. It wasn't that you were impulsive–"

"Yes I am!" I protested.

"Yes, but it's not only that," Ant pressed on, rolling her eyes, again. Notably, the tears had stopped. Being obnoxious was proving to be a good tactic of distraction. "It wasn't like what they make us think, that you're defective, somehow, if you dodge the draft, or don't carry out your duty to the Colonies. I didn't realize until you suggested hocking the Blunder just how many ways Terrex got to me. Made me think you have to be willing to sacrifice yourself for your nation."

"Ant–" I started, though her name caught in my throat. "Don't, it's fine."

"No," said Ant. "You deserve an apology. You were right back on the Undergal. I don't know what it's like to run, to *have to run*. All I've been taught is that it's an act of cowardice, but it's not cowardly to avoid a bloodbath. Running is as radical as fighting, I get that, now. It's just fighting to live. Jean, you were *smart* to run."

Smart. Now, there was a word that hadn't exactly been ascribed to my leadership style. "Ush is the brains of the crew," I said. "I just steer this hunk of junk."

"Don't do that," Ant kissed my lips, now. Spoke against them, slipping me her tongue. "You know what I mean, Jay. Ush may have the science down, but you've got your instincts. That's not a Xeno or human quality, it's a *you* quality. You've all got such big personalities, this place would fall apart without you to keep everyone together. You're not just the Captain, you're

the *soul* of the crew. I know how much you take on because you love them, and they love you, too, Jean. They *need* you, just as much as you need them. You know them, see them for who they are, not for who they were made to be."

"They need me," I repeated. "And I need *you*."

I didn't have to elaborate. She knew what I was getting at. Ant said, "No matter what happens, tomorrow, I don't want you to blame Ush, and I don't want you to give up on the mission. Buy your freedom, settle down with some Griever, and forget about me."

"Don't request the impossible," I ran my hands along her silken back. Urged her lower so I could take her nipple into my mouth. "Oh, right, sorry. I forgot."

"It's okay," Antiope stroked my thigh under the blanket, pressed herself upon me softly so I could feel her nipples weren't the only thing that were firm, now. "Anything could happen on the operating table tomorrow, and I orbit you too much to let him censor our lives."

"There might be one way," I said. When we kissed, Ant groaned into my mouth, which only made me hungrier.

She got comfortable on the bed while I rain my sabers down her spine. Goose-bumps rising as her skin grew flushed and fever-hot to the touch.

I got behind her, yanking the harness out from between the wall and the matter-atom out of the hamper. My hands worked the machine, while my mind worked through something else.

"I don't want to stress you," I said, "but you should know–I should've told you sooner–"

Antiope rolled sideways to stroke one of my horns gently. "Don't tell me anything you're not ready to."

I took her hand into mine. "It's L," I said. "XG-L. Before–" I tried to think. Before what? Before I gored my old friend through? Before L took a bite out of one of my ears and

swallowed? The wound a deep crescent that Ant traced now. “They came onto the ship when their crew was asleep, and we talked about old times. It was never anything serious, just sex, and just the once. Yushes before I met you. I moved on, but I guess L was still sore…They kissed me.” I said the next part so quickly the words ran into each other, “But I didn’t want them to! Well, maybe a part of me…” Now I wasn’t sure what I meant by bringing this up at all. “I orbit *you*, Ant. Of course L could be so….But you and me…”

Antiope squeezed my fingers, kissed my forehead, and gave me a look I couldn’t have read with even Ush’s ultra strength microscopic. Eyebrows knitted, and face sheened in such a thick sheet of sweat I couldn’t tell if the droplets at the corners of her eyes were tears. “I wouldn’t blame you for something like that,” she said carefully. “Thanks for telling me, but L forced you. Didn’t give you a choice. Even if you wanted to, if you didn’t say so, then that’s on *them*.”

“Yeah,” I shuddered as my mind flashed back to the feel of L’s cold, slimy tongue in my mouth. Strange the differences that stuck out now that I’d seen them act like such a jerkass. If I’d agreed to the encounter, maybe all that slobber would be just a funny little memory, a sweet secret. “Are you okay?”

Antiope pulled me closer to play with my hair. Pinching the twists individually in her fingers before letting them fall over my eyes. “It’s just that…I don’t want you to think I have you on some kind, you know…Leash.” Now, she withdrew her hand. “I’ve been in a relationship like that, and I won’t do it again. I’m not talking about my Dad–”

“Bland Bill?” I said.

“Not him, either,” said Ant. “Someone I never told you about. Let’s call him Camera Kent.”

"Okay," a spike of heat rolled through me. The fur on my tail bolting to attention. "I'm here, I'm listening."

"I won't go into detail," she said. "But he's related to one of the five-families. Married in, so just on an in-law branch, but it's still a powerful position. Back at Colony College, he runs–*ran*–the Colony Lampoon. I thought it was impressive, I used to want to be a journalist, and his articles were always so well-researched. Not to mention, his pictures in the paper were very, uh, well-curated."

"I see," I said. "He was handsome. You *do* have good taste, in the looks department."

Ant didn't crack a smile at this. At was as if she'd only heard the first part, and barely that. "Handsome, yes… Kent was like a model, that's what everyone on campus said, that he should model. But he was more interested in taking pictures cleaning the beach than surfing on it. His camera was like a magic wand, it made things real, proved his points for his opinion pieces. What it didn't see *wasn't real*. So, at first, we took lots of pictures together. Posted them to Visogram. Then, when the bruises started showing, we stopped taking them."

"Oh," I said, feeling useless and unsure. I didn't want to assume what Ant was talking about, but I didn't want to brush it off as no big deal, either. I didn't want to pry, but I didn't want to dismiss. "I'm sorry that happened." I put one and two together, then. Understood where this was going. What Antiope wanted–or, given she was being kind of hushed about the ordeal, *needed*–me to acknowledge, again. "I get that this whole chip situation is another violation."

She sniffed. "Thanks for understanding that," Ant said. "He–*Kent*–was so possessive. Wanted to know what I was doing at all times, who I was with. What I was thinking about." She shook her head. "I got the message things were only ever going to get more intrusive when I caught him going through my visotexts. He would've gone through my *thoughts* if he could've."

She threw her arms around my neck. Her tears tickled as they wound down my throat. “To think, every kiss, every thought I ever had about you or Olivia Crest…Every time I went to the bathroom!”

“I’m here…” I held her, that was all I could do, then. That, listen, and fantasize about tearing apart whoever was on the other end of that damned transmission.

Ant sobbed until she didn’t have it in her, anymore. Then, her voice was hollow and strained. “I’ve had my choices taken away for so long, it poisons the ones I do make,” she murmured. “I’m constantly questioning myself, if I made a decision just because I felt like I might be pressured into it, otherwise. Now, I wonder just how much of my anxiety is just someone else planting thoughts into my head.” Ant shoved away from me, taking me by the shoulders as if to inspect me from a clinical distance. To make a declaration: “The only thing I’m sure about is you, Jean.”

“Because I was such a bad decision?” I tried to chuckle, but Ant’s dark eyes were stony and serious as they held on mine.

“Yes.” Gingerly, she rolled onto her belly. Led my hands to her hips, so I held onto her. Felt her body hot and thrumming with life under me. “I *choose* you, Jean. Even if it means that’s for the worse, instead of the better. I *choose* you.” She gave hitching, labored breaths as I kissed her neck with an almost savage passion. Taking her flushed, sensitive skin into my jaws just to feel the miniscule throb of blood rushing through her.

Though I didn’t tell her, more than anything just now, I wanted to bite down and taste her. Taste the iron of Antiope’s life, the chemical make-up of this particular star. “The worst has already come,” I rasped, “this is all my fault!” Despite myself, a tear splashed onto Antiope’s flushed back. “If I weren’t a Xeno…”

Ant's cool fingers played along the nape of my neck. Tangling in the thick tufts of coiled hair, there. She urged me down, planted a soft kiss on my lips. "You can't help being a Xeno any more than I can help being an Adams." She paused for a beat. "Not any more than you can help being attracted to XG-L, or I can help being attracted to such a jackass as that *Captain* Starling."

Now, the both of us shared a good laugh. "Is it the hair?" I asked.

"It's the hair," Ant nodded, gravely. Sending the both of us into yet another fit of chuckles.

I took ahold of Ant's waist, and savored the handful. "What *can* I help, then?"

"I want to feel you inside me, Jean," she said.

I shoved the matt-at back into the hamper. "It's not perfect," I was referring to the dildo. "My hands are shaking."

"I'd be more concerned if it *was*," Ant found the sticky, half-depleted bottle of lubricant buried within the especially menstruation-ravaged underwear.

A vague tendril of curiosity arouse from the deepest recesses of my mind to suggest the speed at which the Galiton was propelling us through space must've been delaying the usually-intrusive burgundy brigand. Though, during scarcer seasons, Ush had informed me a skipped octaver or two was easily written off as a sign of stress.

Aye, that word described the last septurs and more.

Though I felt anything but depleted when Ant squirted lubricant into my outstretched palm. I applied it to the dildo, then her.

Ant shivered under me. "What do you want to do, Captain?"

Now, it was my turn to get chills. A hot, deep flash of desire spiking through me like a fever I never wanted to break. "I want to go in."

I met her thrusts when I slipped inside, took the tender skin of her throat into my teeth. “I don’t care who’s in your orbit, okay?” I said, feeling foolish and all too serious at the same time. “Terran, Griever, Xeno…You belong to *you*, Ant.” I kissed her lips, spoke against the hollow of her jugular. Where her pulse thrummed in alternating beats to my own. “You belong to you, but I’m not afraid to admit you’re part of me.” This was a lie. I was very afraid, and felt like a selfish asshole as I went on, “Not a part I can stand to lose, either. You’re vital.” I drove my hips forward, sweating against her soft, irresistible ass. At this, Ant urged my neck down to kiss the spot beneath my ear. The spot that only she knew would give me chills. “Not my mountain or my moon…You’re the Sun, Ant. Without you, believe me, there’s no life.”

Eagre had counted on backlash, but had not expected where the most of it would come from. Killing another Kaleidizen was already next-to underheard of, but one’s own nestmate was another ordeal entirely. It was a barbaric act, a lowly one Kaleidizens looked down their noses at when their neighbors resorted to. But Eagre still had the benefit of being a Kaleidizen. So there would be a speedy trial, one wash in nest confinement at most–both of which occurred as expected. Much disappointment was rained on the Kaleidizen.

“You disgrace your scales!” Flood said to Eagre more than once.

Rill’s words were less charged but no less harsh, “You’ve been a burden since birth.”

Tide suggested that the community take steps away from the familial squabbles of their neighbors. The closer one was emotionally to a situation, the less likely they were to see reason. Eagre had their reasons, and they explained as much. Now, as the Council of Elders demanded, they were to restrict travel to the giant, gilded nest serving as the Council meeting-place and their own enclosed unit, cast off already from the clusters of other homes.

The cold, clinical, denialist reactions Eagre had come to expect, but not their visitor. Brull taking a yush to travel from the home of the protoctils to Clutchinsterl in their dilapidated ship they'd repaired from a broken-down husk left on the far-off moon.

Brull the Protoctil hadn't lost any steam despite the long yush in orbit. Not any rage regarding the reveal of the corrupt treaty, which had ignited protests and serious talk of separatism from the vulnerable protoctil colony remaining burrowed in supposed Kaleidizen territory. And not any affection for their outspoken, unpredictable friend, Eagre. No, in fact, as the legends say, Brull's passion had only intensified in the absence of Eagre's warm, mischievous glow.

And so, finding themselves welcomed and caught up to date to Eagre's confinement to their nest while an appropriate punishment was considered, Brull found themself residing with the Kaleidizen. By the eleventh wash of living together, the two were making love with regularity. Even as the confinement request lifted, and Eagre was made to labor in the shard mines. Even as Eagre showed them how to work the much faster Kaleidizen cosmocrafts, in case they wanted to return to their home-moon.

Though Eagre and Brull were well aware of the consequences of interacting cross-culturally even politically, the two made little effort to conceal their affection. Nuzzling openly, scale-sharing the most common form of Kaleidizen intimacy outside of all-out sex. A move which caused a rash of threatening acts to spring up, dead lava-dog pups with their throats slit turning up on the nest porch of the couple.

An act Eagre found especially puzzling as they were literally branded a murderer and treasoner a yush previously, but hadn't received quite as much backlash.

Whatever prestige Eagre had known even after intruding on Wave's mind, and killing their own sibling, from being the direct relative of several community leaders, was slowly stripped away over the coming Nuwlyns. Sixty washes into their relationship, there came a crackdown from the leadership directly. A false report drawn up to reflect an infraction of Eagre's parole that had not taken place, and another describing a fictitious protoctil sighting during a violent robbery.

Sensing a boiling point, Eagre advised their lover to take the cosmopod they'd learned to operate, and hide on their home-moon while they confronted their remaining sibling, Rill. Brull refused, at first, only giving in when Eagre agreed to let them check in with them the next wash, at the eleventh xezi.

The wash after urging Brull to safety, Eagre was confronted with a notice from the council of elders. One describing their charges of treason and the threat to Clutchinsterl security their 'relations' with Protoctils posed.

This, Eagre had expected. What the vyjyn-Kaleidizen could never have expected was the sudden resolve to see them dead that swept over their community. Those, even, that had only ever found them a minor nuisance, or shallow young rebel, began throwing glassy shards of obsidian that shattered against Eagre's scales on the long march to the Clutchinsterl courthouse.

The fervor ignited within the crowd was such that many couldn't restrain themselves, lashing out to snatch entire handfuls of scales off of Eagre's limbs. Shouting that they didn't need them, seeing as they'd chosen to fold into that troublesome lot of Protoctils who dared to set up camp within eyesight of the precious Kaleid homeworld.

By the time Eagre reached the stand when called to attempt to defend themself, it's been said that they no longer had a single scale on their body. That they stood as a shadow of their old

self. Not a hint of that cocky, confident grin. Not a glimmer of mischief in their eyes. Nor that proud stance, shivering and naked and knowing full-well what verdict would be passed down before it was said.

And so, instead of bother to waste their breath defending themselves to a council which had already done their deliberating before the trial began, Eagre sang.

The song was all songs, and none in particular. Mournful, and joyous. High-pitched, and low. Long, and short. Fast, and forever.

When it was over, at the eleventh xezi, Rill themself was the one to hand down the decision: Eagre was to be executed immediately.

As this decision was announced, it's been said that the blazing red of the setting Clutchinsterl sun was eclipsed. By what, and what happened next, is a matter of great historical contention.

Some say Eagre escaped to safety as the court was distracted by the eclipse.

Some say they were executed in much the same way they had killed their sibling, Runnel.

Some say the event was no eclipse at all, but Brull arriving at the eleventh xezi, as promised, to distract the court and help their lover and friend escape.

Some say Eagre used their strange and disgusting gift of venom to incapacitate their sibling, Rill. Thus, shocking the court, and stealing off with Brull. Back in the burrows, on the Protoctil's moon settlement, there are those that believe Eagre advised the Protoctil community to always be on alert from invasion from Clutchinsterl. And some agree that this did occur, yushes later.

Yet, some do not.

According to those grasping at fringe beliefs, the nichest of passed down stories, from the most hopeful and perhaps foolish of Kaleidizen lines, Eagre never encountered another Kaleidizen again. At least, not from their previous community.

In this legend, Eagre is said to have lain a clutch of eggs.

In another, similar one, it is said Eagre hatched several eggs, yes, and also gave birth the way their cymar had to them. In excruciating pain, sweating, panting, and not expecting a breathing, crying infant demanding of so much care after already exhausting all of Eagre's strength.

It took many yushes for Eagre to feel like themself, again. And, in the meantime, Brull helped them recover their strength, and cared for their child, who grew curious and furious at Eagre's unwillingness to show them the Kaleid homeworld by the yush. Until, the final mentions of this tale are always hushed and exchanged in whispers, Eagre II was twenty-five, in heat, and more than interested in getting to know others who shared their heritage.

Old enough now to operate a cosmopod, legend has it Eagre II set off for Clutchinsterl, and for answers to their questions. If they ever found them is a mystery, as Eagre and Brull would never see their child again. That is, if any of these legends are true.

No one had ever knocked on my hatch as Pool did, aurons later. Banging on it, jolting me awake, though Ant only stirred beside me. Her arms splayed across my body. Still sticky with sweat. The translator thumped the door, again. Said something, but I couldn't tell what. The sound muffled and impossible to make out through the door. "Hold on!"

I yanked my suit over my legs, but had to peel Ant's legs off of my belly. She rolled over. "Is it time?"

"Not yet," I said. The least we were owed was a final morning together alone. I slid off of the module. Pool made room for me to alight on the floor, rubbing my eyes. "What's going on?"

"I figured it out," they said. Taking me by the shoulder and urging me toward the cockpit. I followed along groggily. "It's not ideal, but it could be like a test, as well as help our chip situation."

Something to help Ant. "Spit it out, Pool," I said. "*Please*."

In the cockpit, the dashboard was strewn with wires. The cell phone Fenton had lended us plugged into Pool's personal radio, which was, in turn, plugged into six ports along the control panel. The largest wire linking to the intercom. "The Furthers," said Pool. "If all the legends are true, and they've really got all this advanced knowledge about every event, item, and procedure that ever existed in the universe…Well, I know the Caniscen has *very* advanced medicine…"

"You want me," I staggered to my seat, "to put my fiance's life in the hands of extragalactic aliens that no one's ever even met?"

Pool nodded. "Let's be real, here, Jean. Human surgical techniques are…well, rudimentary. *Risky*. It's not looking great without any advice, I figured *with* advice, Adams' chances only go up. Right?"

"I'm in," Ush said from the mouth of the corridor. The dark rings around her eyes told me she hadn't gotten much sleep, if any at all. She slumped into her chair. "This is going to be a long, bloody, probably tragic process without it."

"Then so am I," came Ant's voice. She strode across the room to inspect the set-up. "Whatever they are, these Farthers *must* be advanced if they've managed to send signals so far."

"Furthers," Pool corrected. "Or 'whaletail' as Fenton calls it. This *entity* and I have been chatting all night. They're actually a decent conversationalist. It's incredible, the richness of a life soaking through those dew-dropped first words–POETRY!"

"I've always admired your passion for language," Cad rubbed his eyes, standing in his Garfield slippers in the mouth of the hall as he brandished a cooled pot of coffee.

"I know," said Pool. "What's there not to admire?"

Ush pinched the bridge of her nose. "Enough flirting, you two, just tell us more."

Cad slunk to his seat. Tipped the pot over his mouth and gulped the coffee as Pool explained: Whaletail wasn't one person, but dozens. An academic school of people known as a Study, this particular one devoted to collecting knowledge about sustaining life: Medicine, weaponry, emotional health, and the like. All of this knowledge being entered into–well, that was something Pool struggled to describe. Their library was less of a physical place, and more of an endless hall of repeating messages. Directions on handling of precious artifacts, their history, how to respect them so they respected you, so to speak.

In the Caniscen, there was some kind of parasite, a Droovem, they called it. A common infection for Octils and the few Kaleidizens there. Deadly, but only if left untreated by a skilled Octilavian neurosurgeon. Apparently, Octils have been fighting the brainworms for centuries, so had perfected the removal technique. The key was to use a careful composition of raps to the skull to dislodge the winded parasite. There were rolls upon rolls of sheet music organized from early infection to advanced. Whaletail would sing the advanced dislodging song for Ush to use as a guide during the surgery.

"I don't get it," I said. "I mean, Whaletail gets to prove themself, and, of course, it's great for us–for *Ant*–but what do they get out of this?"

"That's just it," said Pool. "Whaletail's prepared to fork over the drokens–all five-hundred thousand–given we hand over the Blunder. Collecting is *religious* to the Furthers, Jean. They feed on it, almost. Preservation is the ultimate honor, so once word gets out to the other studies that Whaletail saved the Milky Way, they're an instant star among their people. Glory, fame, and their own history preserved for generations to come. The hero, the legend, of Whaletail."

A wave of lightheadedness rolled over me. My knees trembling, knocking against the bottom of the dashboard. "Can I talk to them?" I reached out for Pool, but fell forward. Pool caught me. Righted me in the pilot's seat. "Pool, can you translate? Connect me with Whaletail?"

"Um…" They glanced at Antiope, at her own seat in front of the visojecter. "Sure, but–"

"Everyone out, then," I said. It was as if a fresh coat of moondust was glazing my lungs. Every breath labored and thick. Slower, slower, until black faded in and out of my vision.

"You're not well, Jean–" said Cad. Holding out the pot of cooled coffee. I took it, drank from it, as he had. The caffeine chased away the possibility of fainting. "You're swaying."

"I need to be alone," I said. "Please."

Everyone but Pool and Antiope rose from their chair. Cad said, "Just holler if you need anything, Captain."

I nodded. "I will." Looked to Ant. "You, too. *Please*, Ant…I just…want to be sure of this plan."

She searched my face. Screwed up her own. "I'm not going anywhere. It's my brain we're all talking about poking at. The least you could do is let me ask some questions of my own."

"But–"

"I can take it, Captain," said Antiope. "I'm staying."

I swallowed the stone forming in my throat. "Okay," I said. "You're right." I nodded at Pool as Cad and Ush left us three in the cockpit. "Call them."

"No need to," said Pool. They fiddled with the dials on the radio. Clicked the volume button on the cell phone until a faint roar like a great, salt sea gave way to Whaletail's languid song. Loud and smooth, frittered only at the edges by radio static. Pouring down from the intercom. Layered, some soft, shrill notes catapulting to deep, horrible highs. Leaving my ears ringing and confused. "They're always talking." Pool launched into their own song, and Whaletail's ceased for just half an axon. "We've got their attention, what do you want to say?"

"Does it hurt?" said Ant, from her seat, with no hesitation. She ran a hand through her hair. Already, it was well-past the one-inch Envoy mandate. "Is it safe?"

Pool sang, again, but Whaletail didn't pause this time. Only quieted, erratic notes hushing to an even tone. I tried to listen closely to the lyrics, this time around. Words elongated, stretching on for cometons, some for planetons, before coming to abrupt stops. The end of sentences. "*Huwooooooginollinalia caaaaraaaacaaaacaaaaratooo?*" they sang. "*Jeeeteneeeenanana guuuroookinineeetooo, Stuuuduuunenerominooonoc?*" Pool said to Ant, "That's their real name, by the way. It means 'Destruction preservationist.'"

Whaletail idled on several long notes before giving their own reply. The song gentle, easier on the ears than any portion had been so far. "*Feeerinoooookajiyooooooo, aystat epticalskat…Feeerinoooookajiyooooooo, Guuurinooofeeeeeeeeeve.*"

"No," said Pool. "Well, basically. They said: 'No fear…' Then something in a language I don't think I've heard before. Then 'No fear, Griever.'"

Antiope thought on this a moment. Her black eyes seemed to glow brighter with recognition of some kind, or understanding. She picked up the phone. “Thank you,” she said. “Whaletail, I trust you. I’m ready. But, if we’re going to do this, you should know my motives for all this effort. Do you know what–”

Whaletail hummed a curt verse before Ant had even gotten her question out. “Yes,” . “Whaletail is more than familiar with love. It’s a pivotal item in their collection.” They gave the radio a small smile. “The most destructive, according to them.”

CHAPTER FIVE

I'd never regretted my disinterest in learning another language more than that night. Hanging onto every note blaring from the intercom. Cad and Pool squeezing my shoulder, spooning cereal into my mouth, refilling the coffee pot for us all to drink from before someone–I don't remember who–had the bright idea to sprinkle in a little beer.

This was in a separate bowl to keep the liquor from lingering in the coffee pot we hardly bothered to wash with anything that wasn't coffee. Cad had been strictly sober for three yushes, since Ush and Pool had come aboard for good. Turning down anything stronger than coffee, including Streaker, which, like alcohol, I knew he'd once been addicted to. Though the extent of his Streaker habit was a bit hazier than me. He'd described his weaning process many a time after regaling the crew with stories from our first two yushes together.

"First the Streaker to get over the depression," he'd said. "Then the alcohol to get over the Streaker." Coffee was the latest substitute, and one I vastly preferred. I'd take the occasional insomnia and jitters over the daily vomit session any wash.

"Don't worry, Jean," the First Mate said, now. "When I was first diagnosed, labs seemed like the worst place in the universe. But it's not having a lab that's the actual worst. As long as there's a doctor, there's hope." Cad had struggled with depression for yushes after contracting Cyano Sickness. If anyone knew anything about hope, it was him. Fighting the odds to survive that first yush–the hardest one for all Cyano survivors. Spongey purple spores clouding their lungs until their immune system was overwhelmed and overworked from paying attention to the respiratory system.

What was worse, Cad had been among the first wave of those who'd contracted it. The Purple Plague had rended the summer of Twenty-One Seventy a soundtrack of heaving coughs

and crying. Hundreds of thousands died that yush alone, millions the yush after, though there were some strides in treatment options, by then.

The second yush was when the first remission occurred, when the survivors introduced the newly-developed CyanAway inhalation into their health regime. From there, in order to keep all systems functioning properly, an inhaler would need to be a daily habit. With consistent use such as this, Cyano could be beaten back for decades. So long that those surviving and struggling with it could live for as long as others who were unaffected. If a single wash–not to mention several–went by without introducing the medicine into the lungs, new spores could be expected to bloom within aurons. Crawling into the deepest dens of the lungs within washes to suffocate the victim to death.

Cad puffed on his inhaler, now. Slipped it into the pocket of his spacesuit.

"It's mininimally invasive," said Pool. "That's what Whaletail says, anyway." Because music was universal, there was no need for Pool to translate the notes for Ush to knock along to upon Ant's skull. Due to this low invasivity, though, the procedure took three aurons.

Every axon of every avin dragging on like Cad's Garfield slippers against the metal plating of the floor. The sleepy, orange cat smiling slyly up from the First Mate's feet to taunt me with optimism.

"Whatever happens, we're here for you, Jay," Cad hugged me from behind. Rested his chin on my tangled mass of twists. "Always."

"That's right," Pool patted my hand with one hand while they rubbed my ear with the other. Not nearly as intimate a touch as to the horns, a soothing gesture to Ant's pleasurable one. Bringing me down instead of amping me up. At once, their rubbing stopped at the same time as Whaletail's song.

As if to emphasize the sudden silence, metal hinges whined through the corridor. Ush announcing her presence even before she slumped in the mouth of the hall. Pulled a cloth face mask off of her face to reveal her sweat-drenched expression. Mouth pressed into a firm line.

I bolted to my feet. Cad and Pool each clutching my arms as if to keep me from floating up and out of the Kylix. All the moisture had migrated out of my mouth to my palms. Slick as I gripped my friends' hands. "Ant?"

Ush massaged her hands, pressing the knuckles, rubbing her palms. She reached into her pocket. Pulled out a white cloth, like the kind we used to wipe down the dashboard every few octavers, except this one was not covered in dust, but long tendriled stains of deep, dark burgundy. Doctor Lugomir opened the cloth, revealing a silver bundle of thin, blood-caked firmament. On top of which was a gray square the size of my fingernail. "Just like Whaletail said, came out in one piece, all right. Just–Whew, not without a hell of a fight."

It was out. Out of Antiope, but– "Is she…?"

"Fast asleep, should come out of anesthesia within the auron." Ush took to her seat. For the first time in ages, shrugged out of her long, black labcoat. "Other than a small incision at the base of her skull that I sewed up, and a major migraine as her brain unswells, settles into its proper shape, she'll be fine. There's pain-killer for when she wakes, and the headache is only temporary."

My vision blurred as tears welled in my eyes. "Ush…Thank you, *thank you*."

Tendon's small, black body wriggled across the corridor into the cockpit. "More! More!" he crowed. His body undulated across the metal, living smoke, feather over fur as he pawwed at my knees. "Up! More! Inside more!" Ten settled into my lap, cawwing against my belly. "Inside! More!"

"Sorry, little guy," I patted my pockets. "I don't have any treats."

Tendon snorted. Slithering out of my lap to scurry up to Ush. "Food! More!"

She stroked his chin. "After wrestling with *this thing* for three aurons, I'm actually glad to see our favorite little parasite. *Yes I am, yes I am, Ten, oh good Ten!*" She kissed Tendon's black beak, and it chittered. Snuffled at her coat pocket, slung over the chair.

"Should we let it eat the chip?" Pool asked. "It's metal, right?"

"No," said Ush, urging Tendon's nose away from her pocket. "Well, yes. Ultralloy, non-rusting, durable, the strongest metal in existence. Premium stuff. That's not what I'm worried about. It's the tech." Ush produced a steel ingot from the pocket, held it out for Tendon's long, pink tongue to curl around and draw into his mouth. "It's too risky. The location could still emit, it's so small it might not be digested fully. And, per Adams' request, we shouldn't risk planting it on another ship, either. She wants it destroyed."

"Way ahead of you–" Cad drew his purple-handled hammer from her toolbelt. Braced the chip against his iron crowbar to slam the blunt end of the hammer against it. One swift motion, and the chip was reduced to dust and thin filament. "Once more, for luck." This time, with warning, we clapped our hands over our ears as the hammer pummeled the chip. Now, silver flakes sprayed out from the impact. The chip was unrecognizable, more like filmy silver ash than technology. The steel tentacles curled around it like the legs of a long-dead spider. These, Cad stripped with the claw-end of the hammer, until they, too, were limp and lifeless. He used his hand to sweep them into his open palm, stowing his tools. "The rest we can throw out of the hatch. Wouldn't be the only metal remnants streaking through space, right?"

Ush nodded, petting Tendon's black, bristled head once more before it retreated. Drawing back in that way it did when it was sated with the amount of affection dispensed, clicking its

beak in way of goodbye before slithering off into the shadows. “I’ll get the lever if you climb up.”

“I’ll find a container,” chimed Pool. “Just in case, we should write ‘Do not open or ingest’ on the side in a few popular human languages and Kaleidizen, too.”

“What about me,” I said, wiping my face.

“What are you still doing here?” said Ush, peering under the dashboard for the specialized hatch lever. It was out of the way to avoid accidental knee-jerk activation. “Don’t you have a fiance to see?”

I did, so I nodded as the three of them busied themselves. Turned on my heel to stumble, then walk, then dash to the closed lab. Threw the door open, but realized my mistake as the black-blanketed bundle on the reclined operating table twitched.

Antiope grumbled, turning onto her side to reveal the blood-crusted stitches at the base of her skull. The incision was about as long as my pinky finger, clean save for those flecks of drying blood seeping under the zig-zagged black seams. A little swollen, but my own chip-removal had begat a septur-long swelling in the center of my palm. Tender to the touch, so I didn’t touch it.

A square of her growing black hair was shaved to allow for the incision. Like a notch, the only tame portion compared to the mussed mop. Her hair was getting so much longer, now, that it was curling in on itself. The first time I’d ever seen the true texture of her hair.

I closed the door gingerly, padded around the other side to inspect her face. Ant’s expression was peaceful, but growing livelier by the axon. First her eyes squirming beneath the lids, then her breath hitching, releasing, before returning to normal. Her fingers twitching at her sides on the bed.

I didn't want to disturb her by climbing in to hold her like we usually did after sex, so I curled up on her legs instead. Me on top of the blankets while she shivered underneath them in the chilly lab. Her shivers ebbing to stillness as I purred. So much for not disturbing her, but I couldn't help it. The sound low, but still too loud in the silent lab. Way too many vibrations for anyone to ignore. Rumbling out of me in steady tides. In, out.

Though, this too eased into a fainter purr as a glimmer of pleasure emanated from my horns. I looked up to watch as Antiope grinned down at me. Stroked my horns for avins longer before I took her hand, and held onto her for dear life.

Galaxies operate in much the same way as bodies. They have arms, branches of glowing star-splattered gas clouds emanating out from an eye. For the Milky Way, the eye was a black hole. Though, due to the nature of the eye, perhaps mouth would be a more fitting designation.

At any rate, galaxies aren't neat and tidy, but sprawling, sweating, shedding beasts. With stars as cells, and antimatter as blood. Surging through the vast empiness to major organs, here a glowing new sun, there a dazzling field of settling stardust.

To get from one arm to another, one had to traverse cluttered, lethal meteor storms and a sudden loss of balance as one's body adjusted to the new atmospheric layout of the arm they were entering.

The change in pressure was hardest on me. My ears not just popping, but exploding with pressure. My palms slick against the steering wheels, fingers curled at either end, trembling as we navigated a rocky belt of flaming boulders. This pain, however, was nothing compared to the chill burrowing deep into our bones. One that had never occupied the ship, so even I wondered if we needed to replace the already thrice-updated temperature system. It was nothing to do with

any real cold, but the freeze that accompanied death. The witness of death. Especially, we knew now, the causation of death. The ghosts of the Harmony had moved into the Kylix.

As if the visceral memories weren't enough of a reminder, Antiope's diligent radio routine reaped two new discoveries: Firstly, Ush, Cad, and Pool had skyrocketed up the Terrex Most Wanted list, joining the ranks of me and every other Flare Two Defective. Just a step down from the likes of Olivia Crest.

Antiope wasn't mentioned in these broadcasts, which blared holograms of blurry photos of my friends from the background pictures of more popular Orbitters on the astronet. Along with that outdated photo of me. Nor was a specific treasonous instance listed, thus signalling that there was still some Adams influence in the Damage Control department.

The second discovery was the ongoing wave of updates regarding distant Hurrenhail cousin Ren Starling's disappearance. His crew were a footnote in the matter. Their families unable to purchase radio time or the attention of politicians to fund research into the mystery. To unearth, even, if foul play might be involved. XG-L was only referred to as "a pilot," and even then left out of most public calls for action.

That was, until the ship was remotely guided to an investigation bay, where Constables–some the very same that had graduated next to Starling–discovered the frozen, bloodied, frenzied array of the crew. This was when the speculation set in.

Decomposing egg yolk was streaked throughout the craft. Scales that "appeared to be of Kaleidizen origin." The long-windedness was the Terrex News Network's way of skirting accusatory language. The Eldeniv had an entire youth league dedicated to monitoring media mentions, Kaleidizens in the Caniscen that were our age and skilled with editing for quick responses on the astronet. As for a person of interest, there were three theories.

The “one we don’t want to think possible.” The TNN anchor described the diplomatic fall-out if the investigation concluded that Kaleidizens were behind the massacre.

The possibility that Captain Ren Starling was involved in the killings. This idea was downplayed on the radio, only floated briefly. In accordance with the evidence, Starling’s brutal death paired with his struggle injuries, particularly in the hand, suggested a fight over a hotshot. Moreover, Dexter’s blood was splattered across Starling’s face and the top of his boots.

This report was interspersed with testimonials from Starling’s classmates back at Colony College. Their voices altered so their bad experiences with the Captain couldn’t be traced back to them. After all, he was a distant cousin of the Hurrenhail family. On Earth, the five families wielded the same power as the silver suits. Could disappear someone in broad sunlight.

The third party theory was considered fringe, but was supporting by some forensic evidence. Traces of spittle, blood, fingerprints, fur. A strange, metallic cube lodged in Finn’s temple. The strange cyanide capsule in Dexter’s stomach. There was even speculation that Dexter may have been an agent for some Kaleidizen extremist group, given the proximity in time to the massacre to the Undergal asphixiation event, and in location to a known Kaleidizen laying ground. A planet called Vuzilika, where the Central Bureau of Inquiry was conducting its own investigation.

Of course, that wouldn’t explain the bore holes in the walls, or the missing galiton drive. Or the broken coupling port at the underside of the ship, as if another vessel had been attached and hastily unattached.

For now, it was out of our hands, up in orbit.

In the washes and drains that followed, a steady routine emerged: I took to emerging from my module twenty-five avins to the fifth auron. Stealing off to the cabin to get my running in, sure. But most importantly, to throw back two or three cans of Kylix Kölsch.

When I got drowsy, I'd slink back into my module. Waking two aurons later, this time hungover and accompanied by Antiope.

Too hungover to muster the energy to complain when Cad blared Libby Kissel's greatest hits. We all had our ways of dealing with the incident on the Harmony.

Fresh off her recovery from the surgery, Ant dedicated herself to completing the holocopy of her Milky Way maps. Slouching over the visojecter late and long after everyone had dragged themselves to bed, letting the scanner soak in the details of map after map. Constellations, planetary placements, meteor belts, vast fields of needle-sharp, freezing ice.

Pool became a neat-freak, a passive-aggressive dig at the crew's lack of Kaleidizen-standard cleanliness riding their every breath. The broom, mop, or, one time–due to the accumulation of stray spacesuits outside the laundry chute–rake practically glued to their hands. "To think, I was always told humans *craved* organization…" Nevertheless, before either climbed into their sleepmodule, Pool and Cad could be found pressed against the corridor, trading kisses as well as goodnights.

Ush retreated to her lab. Emerged polishing already-gleaming tools. Gazed out into the great nowhere. The blackness blooming to swirling, thick clouds of lavender mist as we neared the edge of the galaxy. The Caniscen glittering just hundreds of planeons away, green and blue stars burning brilliantly through the fog of cosmic fragments. Though not hot enough to keep Ush's cooling cup of spiced tea warm where she cupped it, idle. Not sipping, sometimes unblinking.

I hadn't considered what it must be like for a doctor to take a life, something Ush had taken oaths to preserve. Our acts aboard the Harmony seemed to be physically eating away at the Doctor. Faint rings, then dark, deep ones, giving way around Ush's eyes like sinkholes. Long, fraying strands of jet hair trailing her wherever she wandered, and she wandered often to the fuel gauge. Scratching at her tattoos, fingers following the wavering dial, twitching.

Stranger, still, was our run-in four washes after the Harmony disaster. Late into the drain, but running into a crewmate wasn't entirely out of place.

The Kylix being the Kylix, clanging and thunking in the walls and in the cockpit weren't anything new. But a bad sign considering the recent acquisitions. The Octilaidizen ionic belt didn't so much as whistle, purring contentedly beneath the engine in the bowels of the ship. As for the galiton drive, we were making great time. Lurching through the cosmos at such a rate, it was making me dizzy.

Yet, there was that *rattle*. The one we'd been dealing with for octavers. Paired with a new, wrenching, metallic one.

I watched from the mouth of the corridor a moment, rubbing at my eyes. Maybe my dreams were ebbing into reality that way they did when you just woke up. But Ush didn't fade away, and nothing started making sense.

"Ush?" I called.

The screwdriver clattered to the floor as Ush jerked away from the dash. "Captain!" she exclaimed. "You're awake."

The visojector activated in front of her, and she tried to grasp the hologram, as if to physically smother it. It leapt into view, anyway, of course. Another Consulman Common Sense cartoon.

This one began *in media res*, the goofy Captain Common Sense attempting to cling to a crewmate that was being sucked into space. The cord tethering the crewmate to the dragoon ship running out of slack for Common Sense to grasp, leaving the Consulman in a pickle.

An acronym flashed across the screen: *CUT!*

*C: Clear area of debris*

*U: Unite knife with end of crewmate tether*

*T: Thoroughly saw through cord to release crewmate*

Common Sense smiled as their crewmate drifted off into space, sweat clearing from their brow and their remaining crew clapping them on the back as the cartoon withdrew into the dash. It was one I had seen more than a hundred times.

"What are you *doing*, Ush?" My annoyance was unmistakable. It hadn't yet been an auron since Ant and I had had sex. That ache between my legs that I savored in bed translating to plain old pain on my feet.

"Repairs," Ush said too quickly, stuffing the screwdriver into her pocket. "Just a passing concern, Jean."

"Well, I'm already out of bed," I snapped, joining them at the control panel. "Just show me what's wrong this time."

The fuel gauge was scuffed, now, but nothing was out of the ordinary. Nothing except that we were running more than a little low on ions, but there was Antiope's savings for that. We were set for septurs, if we played our cards right. At least, in that department.

"Nothing, Captain," Ush insisted. "My mistake." The Doctor turned to step through the corridor.

"Ush?" I said. "Is there going to be a problem refueling?"

I wasn't sure what I was asking, not really. After everything, the surgery, Ush sticking by my side even through the massacre aboard the Harmony, after *yushes* of friendship and devoted medical care, there was no way to directly accuse Ush of anything. I couldn't bring myself to.

Ush didn't turn around, only paused in the doorway. Hands curling around the doorframe, fingers fidgeting with the divots in the worn copper. "Not if I can make it back by tonight–I might be able to, I've made more than that in one round before–"

"More than *what*, Ush?" My soft panting curdled over to a wicked bleat.

As if her legs had jellified, Ush collapsed. Curling in on her herself to cuss and sob into the crook of her arm. Whatever was going on, I'd never seen Ush in such a state. Her tears running down her cheeks and over my hands as I cupped her flushed face. "Six-thousand dollars," choked the Doctor.

"Dollars," I repeated, and everything made sense. Not drokens, the spare change we could scrounge up after the belt purchase, dollars. Terran cash. Antiope's savings. "How did you…*When* did you…?"

But this question only had one answer. During the surgery. While Antiope lied unconscious, my friend–the friend I'd introduced her to–pickpocketed her. My own eyes stung, and I swiped at them viciously. Scratching my cheeks and sending droplets of blood flying across the corridor. "Push the Assembly Alarm, and set a course," I stood. Brushed past Ush to start back toward my module. If Ant had to be jarred awake with such news, I wanted to wake her myself.

"A course?" Ush uttered from the floor.

"I don't care who you gambled it off to," I said over my shoulder, "we're getting that money back."

"It's not that simple, Jean–" Ush brushed the dust and Pool's stray scales from her suit as she stumbled to her feet. "I wish it was…The money lost–It's not traceable. Encrypted astronet sites don't hold onto user information."

"Right," I spun to face her. I hadn't considered this. Gambling was technically illegal, off the books, anyway. Terrex taxed official establishments, like the Lucky Eleven on Pisces, where Marshall Boners had been posted. If one wanted to make off with the complete sum of their winnings, there was only the complete risk of losing it all to some stranger you couldn't so much as spit in the face of. "That's it, then. We're out of cash, and the craft will run out of fuel, and function–including ventilation and electricity–within three aurons." Had to think through the ice encasing my brain. Who did we know in the Outergal who might be able to help?

No one came to mind, but one thing did. "I don't understand," I said, "I know you're ill, Ush, and–and I know what we did back on the Harmony wasn't easy…Not that, and not all the attention…" I thought back to the radio broadcasts. At least once an auron, a reminder of the urgency of our capture. Each our names spelled out and enunciated. Our pictures blaring out of millions of people's visojecters.

"I could've laid low," Ush shook her head. "That chip–The Terrex Most Wanted list…" Doctor Lugomir hugged herself, sweeping her palms along her transparent sleeves. Her tattoos, the blanket of ink etching out all those words–that history. The only real keyhole through the darkness that brown crescent on the back of her left hand.

I peered through it as far as I could, but gave up. Let my gaze fall with all the weight I regretted carrying to the Medic Officer's eyes. "Ush," I said. "For once, just let me in."

It wasn't an order, not really, but Ush responded as if it had been. "Someone I used to work with sent me a message about the bounty. I've paid them off before, but now that the value

has gone up, they said, so has the interest." At once, I realized what this was really about. The reason Ush had gone into orbit.

"The chip's out," I said, "I don't get it, there was *no way* for this person to find you. What're you so afraid of?"

Ush used a fingertip to trace her tats. "They said if I didn't come up with nine drok within three washes, they'd–Well–" Ush scratched clean through her suit sleeves. Rupturing the transparent material, until it mended moments later. "This person knows things about me, Jean. Things I did when I–"

"When you what?" I urged. "Operated a drill ship?"

"Before that," said Ush. "Before I met Pool, and worked for the Research Wing, and after the League certified me."

"Am I meant to solve this like a riddle, Medic Officer?"

Ush swallowed, hard. Clenched her fists, unclenched them. "Before I met any of you, I worked for the Colonies."

A meteor materialized in my throat. "Doing *what*?"

Ush glared at the floor. Their blurry reflection in the grimy steel panelling. "Things I'm not proud of–No doctor on the project is, but there weren't a lot of positions for someone fresh out of the League, and we needed letters of recommendation. Once the project was done, everyone paid *them* off, then scattered."

Despite myself, my frustration dissipated. So this was about shame. That, I could understand. "We'll get through this, Usher, but you need to tell me who this person blackmailing you is so we can negotiate some of that money back. At least, for now. Work out some kind of payment plan–"

"Atticus R doesn't do that," said Ush. "They *take* cash. Atticus *dispenses* streak. Not the other way around, not any other way."

"ATTICUS R?" *That* Atticus R. The one Cadbury had been worked up about owing, too. It seemed this Atticus had a long-time invisible stranglehold on the Kylix funds. Then again, druglords exclusively operated in Outer Space. Even if we could limp to the nearest dock, secure a fighting chance at avoiding a cold core–total systems failure–we might *still* end up on this Atticus' radar, somehow. The outer rim of the galaxy was just one huge small town. One it was deadly to make a misstep in. "We don't have the money, now, but once we sell the Blunder we'll have more than enough to repay them."

"That's the thing, Captain," Ush said. "With all the attention, they're worried I'll go to prison before I repay them."

"Then they're smart!" I barked before I could think better to. Ush wincing at my words in a way that made me think back to the Harmony. I couldn't watch myself become so domineering a Captain as Starling, but there was no going back to the kind of Captain I was before. I had to evolve. "How much do you have left?"

"One-hundred twenty-five dollars," admitted Ush. Now, I understood what she meant about multiplying funds overdrain. There was *one* way. It just so happened to be a rotting, open wound in Ush's history.

"Set a course for the Murx Derby stadium," I said. "We've come too far for this mission to be compromised."

Ush told the crew everything but the details of her past job. Not that it was a Colony position, just that she owed Atticus R. An admission Cadbury sprayed iced coffee all over his tie-dye after. "*You* know Atticus R?"

"Yes," said Ush, after her apology, "and I don't care to talk about how."

"You owe us a better explanation than that," Ant looked up from our blinking target coordinates projecting from the visojecter. "I thought we were friends, Ush–I trusted you!"

"We *are* friends," Ush said.

"Princess has a point," Pool added. "What did you do that was so terrible you'd risk us freezing and starving just to keep it quiet?"

Ush howled like a wild animal in complete and total agony. Spinning in her seat to face the dashboard. "I've done everything I can for this crew for three long yushes and they haven't always been easy ones," she snapped. "Never have, actually. This *one* time, I just need everyone to trust that I'm sincerely sorry for putting us out of the way like this, and that I wouldn't do it if it wasn't for a good reason."

"I'm with the Doctor," I chimed in, from the helm. "There's no use rooting around in the past."

"No," said Ant, "just our pockets!"

"Well–I mean–" I stammered. "I just mean that when this is all behind us, no one is saying we'll hold this against you."

"I am," Pool's tone was as steely as their heavy, metal arm. "I don't know what's gotten into you, Ush, but it only makes me *more* suspicious that you'd do this after so many yushes on your high horse."

We were coming up on an asteroid belt, the main attraction of which was obvious to anyone. Murx was the flattest asteroid, sure. Wide and as large as a moon smooshed in a hydraulic press. But it was also rotating on a vertical axis– the docking lot, metal colosseum of a stadium, and living beings on the asteroid spinning like spitroasting meat at the mercy of the winds of space.

"Gambling doesn't fly with Keplurastians," Cadbury noted as glided in while Murx was relatively stable and upright.

"Neither does murder," Ush said matter-of-factly.

"I'm not comfortable with us being separated, right now," I said. "Besides you're not gambling, Ush is."

Nelson didn't brighten much, at this. "I thought you didn't do that, anymore," he addressed the Doctor.

Ush didn't meet his gaze. "It's an addict's tradition," she said. "One last drink, one last streakStick, one last bet…"

Cadbury mulled this over. "I want this to be the *last* last," he said.

The docking lot was magnetic. Just enough so to keep the ship from falling away into space, but not locked to the lot.

When we emerged from the hatch, an attendant in a green silk vest approached with a box of metallic boot coverings. And their hand out.

Ush blushed as she paid the attendant twenty dollars out of the one-twenty-five remaining. We were officially down to one-hundred-five.

The five of us donned a pair of the metal boots on the outer rungs of the Kylix, before dropping down to the floor.

We snapped to it, the magnetic boots so strong that my knees knocked together in the whiplash. It was a hassle, even, to raise one foot and step forward. My thighs, calves, back, and shoulders burning with the effort.

More seasoned betters strode to the long lines in front of the betting booth with ease. Didn't so much as glance at the chart of the winning odds to the side of the booth attendant, another human in a green vest.

"Let's make this fast," I said, turning to the crew. "Ant, you and Cadbury find seats inside. Far up and away from the field, please. Ush will get us goggles at the betting booth."

"What about Pool?" said Cad.

"Way ahead of you, Captain," said the Translation Officer, holding up two cases of Kylix Kölsch they'd brought off of the ship. "Figured we could recoup some of those losses in a place like this."

"Perfect," I said. "I'll see you all inside."

Ush and I got in line.

For as depraved a place as a gambler's den, the clientele was running more upscale than I'd anticipated. Pale Terrans in black and navy suits, shades drawn over their eyes to protect their identities. Xeno pilots at their side, holding their drinks while they ordered tickets. One xeno even gave a Terran toddler a shoulder-top ride. The tiny Terran pulling at the pilot's thick, black lion's mane.

"Captain?" Ush had followed my gaze.

"Just take out the damn bet, Ush," I said.

So we got to the front, and they did. As one, we perused the odds chart:

| **EQUINID** | **ODDS** | **BUY-IN** |
|---|---|---|
| Equinid O'War | 4-9 | 10.50 dr |
| Landcookie | 1/2 | 13.25 dr |
| Stellar Fellow | 2/3 | 15.00 dr |
| Phar Star | 1/3 | 12.00 dr |
| ... | ... | ... |

"What do you think?" said Usher.

"You know this stuff," I snapped. "Not me."

She nodded grimly. "We want four buy-ins for Stellar Fellow, then," said Ush.

The attendant rolled their eyes as they took the 90 drok. "You, and every other better in line."

We added in the binoculars, to better see the equinids as they raced along the dirt track. Through the jagged metal archway of the Murx stadium, I used them to search the stands for my crewmates.

There were probably two or three hundred people in the bleachers. Half Terran, and half Griever. And, though it was technically a sporting event, there was no fanfare to the crowd. No spirited colors, shirts patterned to match the checkered jackets of the equinid the spectator had come to see perform.

No cheers as the hulking, quadrupedal beasts trotted around the ring-shaped course to practice staying in their chalk-outlined lane.

No passion in the voice of the announcer, uttering out from a rusted automatic megaphone high up on a pole attached to a speaker. A long, elevated cord running through to the announcer's booth at the other side of the stadium.

I supposed, to avoid being ransacked by any riots that might occur in the spectator lot.

Pool had already succeeded in making a handful of sales, pocketing the black tokens as a man and woman each walked away with a can of Kölsch.

There was a man in the fourth to highest row, to the far right, that bore a strong resemblance to Cad. Without the binoculars, it was easy to overlook, but with the goggles, it was almost creepy.

He was one of the upscale-type customers. A Griever in a navy spacesuit, with dreadlocks that spilled out of his helmet. Encased in ice, as Nelson's often were in the morning.

Seated next to him, a white-haired Terran in a similar spacesuit–but with more patches–clutched a black, leather suitcase with a combination lock. This man was older, in his seventies, or eighties. With glasses, not medicated goggles, like mine. Real, Earth glasses. The kind that would float away if his helmet were to pop open.

I let my binoculars linger on the pair of men a moment before sweeping to a higher row. There, at the top, just under a shady awning. Cadbury's tie-dye suit screamed out at me in a way that made my seething rage at Usher dissipate, just a bit. Ant and Cad had done well on an inconspicuous spot, but if even just one person recognized Cad's usual get-up, well… At least the energy of the track couldn't get any deader.

"Captain?" Ush prompted me as I allowed myself to take a nice, long, zoomed-in look at Antiope. We were so rarely on land, I never got to admire her from afar.

Even just leaned over on her elbow, bored and waiting for the damned race to start, she was stunning. Lips pouting, black eyes alive with movement as she gazed out at the blinking stars. Tapping one boot on the back of a seat even as the man in front glared at her.

Even obscured by her suit, her body had a delicate, angular quality. The lanky sharpness she shared with the Secretary far more appealing when draped over Antiope's lovely form than that square. I craved the feeling of her hips in my hands, her pulse at my sabers…

"With all respect, Captain," Ush cut in. "She's your *girlfriend*. You can check her out, anytime."

"Sure," I said, handing over the binoculars. "But a guy's got to savor every chance to explore new angles."

A Griever in a lavender suit lost grip of their giant pretzel.

The nearest practicing equinids hustled to the metal track gate to crane their necks over. Their long, slimy tongues straining, vying to claim the steaming, dirt-covered pretzel.

We waded through a gaggle of children thrusting their gloved hands through the gate grating. Wiggling their fingers at the equinids.

The four-legged beasts, though strapped with muscles and six feet tall, were oddly gentle as they nibbled at the kids' fingers. Sending them rollicking wth laughter back to their parents in the stands.

An equinid in a blue and white checkered vest reared up on its hind hooves to half-leap out of the track. It snatched the pretzel into its snout, reared up again to retreat behind the gate once more, and downed the confection in three snaps of its fanged jaws. "That's us," said Ush as we sidled next to our crewmates. "Our equinid. Stellar Fellow."

One of the jockeys, a woman in a gold and gray checkered vest to match her equinid's, lashed an arm-length leather whip across the creature's hindquarters when it lingered at the gate.

The equinid snorted, trotting slowly back to the starting pen.

"Well," I looked Stellar Fellow up and down with the binoculars. No welts on the hind. "He's well-fed."

"He's the greatest living athlete, human or otherwise," Ush couldn't suppress her passion, and it was weirdly contagious. "A six-race streak at the Dachdyl Deluxe. Breeding rights auctioning off at a start of one *million*."

"I don't get it," said Cad. Though he wasn't looking at Stellar Fellow, or even the track. His eyes were fixed on Pool, at the corner of the lowest row of seats. The Translations Officer was selling beer to a Kaleidizen with thick, ruby-deep plumage. "All that fuss just to decide who gets to combine DNA with who."

"Well, they're animals," Ush went on. "It's *all* about strategic breeding. For certain traits, you know? Long legs, big hearts, lung capacity, fast reflexes… Every pairing is like real-time genetic engineering to create the perfect racing machine."

"You're describing eugenics," Nelson noted. "If you substituted *Humans* for *Equinid,* you'd be talking about genetic superiority."

"Humans have the Galactic Olympics," Ush shot back. "People are *awarded medals* declaring their genetic superioritity."

"Just because it's normalized doesn't make it right," said Cad.

"*We're gearing up for the Third Quarter Grand Murx Semi-Final, folks*," the announcer sounded through the mounted megaphone. "*Our contenders are looking spirited, if a little nervous*."

This was an accurate assessment. There were nine equinids in total, their pelts ranging in color from straw-yellow to dirt-brown. Some had markings, like spots, or flowing manes. Stellar Fellow had a few pale freckles on his brown snout, with a rusty-red mane sprouting from his long neck.

While his peers chittered and clawed at the gates, gnawing on their reigns, he only stared forward.

"Even acts like a winner, right?" Ush nudged me. "Makes me wonder how this track can even afford an appearance from him."

This, I hadn't given thought to. Ush was right, the equinids lined up shoulder-to-shoulder with Stellar Fellow had tangled manes, or knotted tail hair. Untrimmed hooves, cheap-looking reigns. These were racers looking to come up, to win enough prizes to rise to Stellar Fellow's level. Not his peers, not yet.

"Could be some kind of charity ride," Ant suggested.

The word "charity" didn't belong anywhere near mentions of this place, though.

"*Look alive, listen up, people! We're just seconds away from the start…Three…Two…"* A horn trill sounded from the megaphone, and the pen gates flew open.

As one, the band of heaving equinids surged forward. Tan dust billowing out in a cloud behind their hooves like rocket exhaust.

Phar Star was a surprise stand-out. The star-colored, nimble equinid pacing herself with a series of trots followed by sprints of cometon-closing ferocity. On the outside of the pack, she held strong to first place for two entire avins before Stellar Fellow almost recklessly threw himself over the gap between them. His hooves cracking against the hard-packed dirt.

He stumbled a moment, Equinid O'War and Landcookie–tying at third and fourth position–catching up quickly. Universal King, a strong contender holding tight to their fifth position at Equinid O'War's black, well-groomed tail, strode through the curve in the ring-shaped track to match strides with Landcookie.

Then, moved to pass Stellar Fellow in the second lap.

This act seemed to awaken a kind of competitive edge in Stellar Fellow.

While Universal King's jockey whipped him through a resting jog, Stellar Fellow chuffed and picked up the pace without any urging.

Quickly dispatching of Universal King, Landcookie, and Equinid O'War as competitors. Now, it was just a matter of Phar Star. Her consistency was outstanding, a steady speed, no slowing down, but no speeding up, either.

This, Stellar Fellow took up as a cause as he matched Phar Star around the bend for the third lap. The two neck-and-neck. Phar Star giving a passionate, song-like whinnie that choked off into a howl as Stellar Fellow reared back to fall behind her a moment.

In the same instance, he leapt forward. Well past her, then did so again.

The crowd erupted into gasps and scattered cheers.

The announcer chimed in, "*It seems Stellar Fellow came out with something to prove towash, folks. He has a reputation, and he's not willing to hand it over to a newcomer, just yet. I've never seen an equinid come back from such a mid-race struggle. Now, he's one cometon ahead of Phar Star. Two cometons–five–nine–thirteen cometons beyond Phar Star and still speeding up! This equinid is more machine than animal!*"

This, no one could question. What the fuck were they *feeding* that thing?

Stellar Fellow threw his head back to send that rustic mane billowing. Stretched his legs out to their wide extension, then snapped forward. Hardly touching the ground. Suspended for half of the pace, practically flying.

"Jean?" said Cad.

I hadn't realized I'd gotten to my feet. The railing on the top row chest-high, so I had to lean over it to get a closer look as Stellar Fellow neared the finish line.

He was in the final stretch of the race, just fifteen more cometons to go. Twelve. No, already ten.

"*Equinid O'War passes Phar Star in a last-ditch leap for second, it seems. It's not even close as to who'll be first, though, folks. Stellar Fellow is all on his own!*"

Usher and Antiope got to their feet, along with the rest of the crowd. A cheer tore through the middle section, even those who waved tickets flashing the names of other equinids calling out Stellar Fellow's name.

For a reason I couldn't explain, tears welled in my eyes. I had to press the dehumidifier button under my helmet to vent the mist. This race was one thing, but this equinid's sheer skill was another.

Pushing so hard, closing such a monumental gap. I don't know, I guess it reminded me of life in orbit. For all intents and purposes, humans shouldn't be clinging on outside the precious 'Goldilocks Zone' that Earth occupied. We were just the stragglers, pushing on.

And on, and on, as Stellar Fellow stretched out his snout to the finish line, spray-painted in gold just five cometons ahead of him. Four. Three…

A flash of red jetted out of the southern section of the crowd, and Stellar Fellow's left hind-leg flew off into the crowd.

The equinid, himself, coasted on the momentum up the second cometon before the finish line. Red blood gushing from his wound, Stellar Fellow threw his neck around to watch as Equinid O'War crossed the finish line and won the Grand Murx.

Ush gaped at the racetrack.

Parents in the crowd hustled off to the exits, hands clapped over their children's eyes.

As for those who remained, the announcer explained, "*It looks like that big rearing leap in the second lap caught up to Stellar Fellow. Equinid O'War takes home the victory in the Third Quarter Grand Murx Semi-Finals! Congratulations, and, as a reminder to those who haven't read the betting policy, we will* not *be fielding any questions from the press or public, at this moment. Thank you!*"

Antiope glared at Usher. "Great plan, *Doctor*," she sneered.

"How was I to know…?" Ush trailed off. "None of this makes any…? How could…?"

"I heard they put equinids down when they lose a leg," Cadbury shook his head. "What a horrible way for an animal to die."

"Guys, seriously?" Ush looked around at us. "How many times has someone died from their *limb spontaneously flying off due to exertion*?"

"In space, given the percentage of Grievers that skip their exercise routine regularly–" I started.

"This race was *rigged*!" Ush peered over her shoulder, but the crowd was beginning to thin out. Everyone who betted on Equinid O'War off to collect their winnings, and everyone else off to scratch their heads and down a can of Kylix. "We need to get out of here, NOW!"

Nelson stood, stretching his back. “I’ve got to use the bathroom, first,” he said. “As the official crew plumber, I believe it’d be beneficial for us to spare the septic system another gallon of urine.”

“Make it a fast gallon,” I said. “But good point, First Mate.”

We reunited with Pool, at the bottom of the bleachers.

“What the Eldeniv was *that*?” said the Translations Officer.

“Ush thinks the race is fixed,” Cad explained as we found the exit corridor. Turned with him onto a branching hallway, the one leading to the door labeled “*Men’s Restroom*.”

There was a “*Gender Neutral*” option down another hall, but the fur on my tail was standing on end. It only did that when there was trouble or lightning storms, and I didn’t hear any thunder.

Better to stay close.

“Given the results of the 2140 United States election,” Ant jerked her head toward that white-haired man, the Terran, seated on a bench in front of a small, steel statue. “*Fixed* is the perfect word.” She lowered her voice to hiss, “That’s Senator Riley Gizzards!”

“Are we supposed to know who that is?” I said.

“He’s like the Earth version of a United Colonies representative. No one back in America likes him, much, though, since the election. It’s said he took money from French and Canadian donors to endorse a presidential candidate who wanted to destabilize Africa.”

“In Grievelish, Ant?” I said.

“He was a member of a corrupt cabinet that empowered my Dad enough to stage an attack at the Andromeda,” she said.

“The Skirmishes,” Pool said. “I get it, they were just five yushes later.”

Ant nodded, “Gizzards wrote about a third of the advancement orders.” She glared at him longways, her expression curdling into a snarl. “The thousands of Grievers that joined up on the promise of a landing license–*ZAP!* It was humanity’s first exposure to laser tech.”

“Can’t say Aries didn’t learn from his mistakes,” I said.

Pool shot me a look, but I shrugged. “It’s true. He went back to the drawing board, and came back with something that ended the conflict in his favor. In a disgusting, genocidal way, but still.”

“It’s only a myth that the Eldeniv were going to fight their way through to Earth,” sniffed Pool. “Only humans chase their enemies when they’re retreating.” They glanced up as a human pushed past the bathroom doors, and strode past us. “Cad’s taking kind of a long time.”

“If I told you the things humans do in there, you’d rethink your attraction,” said Ush.

Pool rolled all six of their eyes. “I’m well-aware of the process of excreting, thank you, Doctor.” The Kaleidizen braced their hand on the bathroom door. “Cadbury, you okay in there?”

“*Yes!*” came a terse, gruff voice.

“*No!*” came Cadbury’s.

Pool threw the door open. It banged into the wall, causing Senator Gizzards to yelp and cower as we barged into the Men’s restroom.

Inside, the restroom was cramped, and sterile. Industrial steel making up the walls, floors, stall doors, urinals, and deep sink basins. The easier to clean stains off of.

In one corner of the small room, backed into the steel trash can, Nelson stood with his hands up.

At the other end of the room, between the first stall and the sinks, the man in the navy spacesuit pointed a Colony-standard hotshot at the First Mate.

It was Nelson's lookalike. Though, now that the two were in close quarters, I could see that this man had some major differences. While Cad sported his typical, steady stubble, this man had a full, black, curly beard. Shorn into almost a perfect square, a goatee.

His dread-locks were shorter than Cad's, too. Just by six or seven inches, but it was noticeable.

He was wearing Grievers' goggles, now, too. Medicated, like mine. There were a few gray hairs, already, too, in his beard. He was probably five or ten year older than Nelson. Though their complexion, brown eyes, and high cheeks made for eerily similar faces.

"Matthew," I said it like an accusation.

"That's Councilor Cadbury, to you, genefreak," Matthew Cadbury corrected.

So this was Cadbury's oh-so important brother.

I sized him up. There was nothing especially attractive about the guy, he didn't have a certain flair or swagger. At least, he didn't exude one, like Fenton Hendrix, or even Ren Starling.

He was just a Griever. A man with skin no browner nor paler than mine, in a nice navy spacesuit. Well-shined black boots adorned his feet, and nice white gloves covered his hands that I hoped he had removed to wash after utilizing the facilities.

I wondered what it was about him that made him Cad's mother's favorite. What about this random man was so worth lobbing my First Mate off of the family tree like a rotten limb.

"I gotta say," I said. "I don't see it."

"I never did," said Nelson. "I think Ma saw the money, before anything else."

"And why not, for the salary I make?" Matthew swept his weapon over the rest of the crew as a man exited a stall to wash his hands. Matt spoke as he lathered up between rinses. "Our family will never move forward with a needy little snowflake dragging us down. Now, you've

got the nerve to dirty our name with that bounty! Six octavers before a local election!" The Councilman thumped the sink basin, and the automatic faucet activated. Spouting a handful of water. He leveled the gun at me. "Let's see if everyone's accounted for: Captain Genefreak, the Adams family failure, Lizard Alien ass-probe professional, Doctor Whatever-Mir… Then my baby sister–oops, no *brother*–or is it baby *Kaleidizen*, now! I can't keep up with you kids nowadays! You're confusing Ma so much, she'll end up developing early dementia if she ever sees you again!"

"That's your own brother you're talking about," Ant said.

"I have no brother," growled Matthew.

"I'm glad Cad got away from people like you," Pool piped up. "You're a bully, Matthew."

"Don't test me, Lizard," said Matt.

"Go on," said Pool. "Break a dozen treaties."

"Gladly!" The Councilman unleashed a powerful volley of lasers upon Pool that ate away at their body, their suit. Before both layers sutured shut before our eyes.

Pool walked through a second wave of red lasers. The Translations Officer reaching out to wrench the weapon from Councilman Cadbury's hands.

They handed it to me. Our third Colony-standard hotshot, we'd have to establish a weapon's bay soon enough.

For now, Antiope inserted it into the silver cranny disk, where Dexter's and Starling's hotshots rested against the suitcase containing the Blunder.

"Now, don't you feel silly?" Pool whipped their steel arm across Councilman Cadbury's face. The fingers were open, a slap, but that made little difference.

A bruise bloomed across Matthew's face. "That's Assault on a Colony Representative!"

"That's getting what you deserve," Nelson took Pool's scaled hand, kissed them when the Translations Officer leaned down to allow it.

The look on Matthew Cadbury's face would've made for a good recreation of that ancient *The Scream* painting. "I would've thought even you were above Xenomy, *Deadname*."

Everyone winced at the word.

Pool released Cad's hand to lunge forward, baring their fangs and slobbering venom. "That's it, you've got a coma coming, *Councilor*!"

Antiope stepped between Matthew and Pool. The Councilor ducking behind her as she spread her arms out to block Pool's jaws. "We've got enough heat on our tails, Pool," she said. Then blushed, glancing at me. "Uh, on our *asses*, I mean."

"I like that edit," I added. "And she's right, Pool. The last thing we need is for some Terrex official to go missing with us in the background footage of this race, or something. Worst case scenario."

"He's recognized us, anyway," Pool countered. "We *have* to get rid of him."

"He won't talk," said Nelson. He partially unzipped his spacesuit, parting the tie-dye flaps to reach inside. He pulled out a screwdriver, a wrench, then a head-sized brick of emerald powder.

"Holy shit," Ush said. "Nelson?"

"It was Marshall's," he explained. "Boners dropped it back before he was shot. I, uh, thought it might come in handy as a bargaining tool."

"Bribery of a Colony Official," Matthew Cadbury didn't look up from the brick as he took it. Even in the sparse fluorescent glow from the bulbs above the mirrors, the Streaker glittered like powdered stardust.

"I've had it tested," Nelson said. "It's pure, no trace of Cyano, no lacings, just basic baking soda padding for the Streak to latch to."

"I know how it works, idiot!" Matthew snapped.

"Sure, you do," Cad said. "Orbitters are the face of addiction, but everyone knows politicians and entertainers are the ones *really* hooked on the stuff." I wondered if this was information he'd gleaned from his years counting bricks in warehouses. Reporting to Atticus R.

Nelson watched as his brother peeled back one corner of the transparent plastic covering. Dug around in his pocket for a bronze key.

The Councilor dug the end of the key into the brick, creating a green link of pillowy dust. Matt scraped the link onto the key, and held it under one nostril while he suppressed the other.

In one long inhale, the Streaker whisked up Councilor Cadbury's nose.

He rubbed at the pale green ooze that followed, clearing the drip. "That's pure, all right." Already, flecks of bright green glowed in his deep brown irises. "Pure and strong."

"Strong enough for you to leave me and my *real* family in peace," Cad said. It wasn't a question.

Matthew waved. "I wouldn't want to stress Ma with the news, anyway," he said as he readied another line.

"Besides," said Ush. "Gambling goes against Colony Committee conduct code."

"That, too," said the Councilor. "Sure, okay. It's between us." He inhaled, another finger-length line of Streaker rushing up his nose, into his lungs, bloodstream, then, at last, brain. "Though you can hardly call it 'gambling' when that Phar Star keeps coming in second."

We exited the bathroom as an Octil walked inside.

"Did you hear that?" said Ant. "I don't think the Councilor rigged this race."

"Him and Grandpa Gizzards?" Ush glared down at the Senator as we strode past him, now checking his watch and drumming his fingers along the top of his leather suitcase. "Maybe in his heyday, Gizzards was a blood-thirsty, war-mongering, election-rigger, but monsters tend to mellow with age."

"Beer doesn't unspoil," Pool interjected. "Once a monster, always a monster. Evil doesn't die, it just goes dormant."

Without any winnings, any money left, and with only about a wash worth of fuel in our tank, our walk through the docking lot to the Kylix felt more like a trudge to the grave.

We hadn't cut it this close in over a yush. I'd almost forgotten what it was like to worry about total system failure. In that way, our proximity to Ant had granted us a reprieve from the usual Griever worries. Now, without that reliable Constable paycheck, we were well and truly fucked.

There was no use in dwelling on Ush's part in the situation, as far as I was concerned. It was as River had said: "Over."

The docking lot was mostly empty, now. There was just an attendant in a green vest sweeping up paper cups and flyaway hay from the stables behind the tracks. As well as a few lingering ships. The bulky, navy-painted *Columbia Sixty-Seven* that I assumed Matthew Cadbury

and the Senator had arrived in. A sleeve, tube-like bronze ship that had a flashing sign on the side reading, "*Next Stop: Wherever, As Long As You're Paying*."

I'd never actually seen a cosmocab. They were considered swanky, the fares high and fixed in some quadrants by orangesuits, like Marshall Boners. Though, I supposed he wasn't exactly breathing down anyone's next, lately.

We came upon the body-sized all-terrain wheels of the Kylix. "We'll think of something," I gripped the first rung of the ladder along the side of the ship. "I won't go to sleep todrain until I do."

"The wash is still *so* young, Captain," the Griever that sat on the hatch at the top of my ship sported a soft, easy smile. "As are we, eh? Sleep should be the furthest thing from our minds." They had thick black locks drawn behind their ears so those deep dimples were unmissable. And these piercing gray eyes, staring right through me.

"Who the fuck are you, and why the fuck are you sitting on my ship?" I swiped at the obnoxious Griever's buckled blue boots, dangling by my head.

The Griever glared past me. Past Ant, and Pool, and even Cadbury, to settle on Usher. "You've been running for a long time, Doc." Atticus R. reached inside their silken orange spacesuit to pull forth a hotshot. The body of the gun glinting gold, no doubt pure. After the Harmony disaster, no one bothered to balk at the gesture. "I've found friends to hide behind, too, so I get it."

Orange fabric flashed across my vision as a hoard of humans in brigand colors jammed guns adorned with gold into the backs of my crew. A steely, cold, hard barrel kissing the base of my own spine. There were even more on standby, hotshots drawn, Pink "11" symbols sewn into the chest of their suits. All looked up to their leader for approval.

"Boners taught you all something, after all," Atticus R. slid down the side of the ship to land on the ground. "Throwback Wesir, am I right? Nelson Cadbury, how long has it been?"

Cad looked as if he were speaking through a mouthful of glue. "Four yushes or so, by my count," said the First Mate.

"Counting never *was* your strong-suit," said R. "Inventory is bound to be a nightmare when you're dealing with an addict. It's been *five* yushes, Nelson."

"I'm four yushes sober, I'll have you know," Nelson corrected the brigand.

"According to the Kaleid whisper network, you're rolling with a war criminal," they pointed their hotshot at Ant, then me. "A treasonous deserter." Now, Pool. "A race-traitor." Then, finally, Ush. "And *Usher Lugomir*. With company like that, Cad, you've got no business trying to take the moral high-ground."

"Hey, I'm a thief," Nelson admitted. "I'm also an impersonator, and an *avid* xenomist. We all are, everyone *but* Ush."

"That's right," said Ant. "She's the only one of us who might actually have a crack at Colony Court."

"That includes you, *Atticus*," I growled. "If you let any of us go, it should be Usher."

A sick glint of something like glee played across Atticus R's pale gray eyes. "They really don't know," they shook their head. "This is gonna be *good*."

"Atticus–" Ush started, but Atticus whistled twice, and pointed at her. Two of the ten present bone men gripped Ush's arms. Hoisted her up so her feet ran on her as they carried her off to the end of the docking corridor.

"Save it," Atticus R pulled a ring of keys out of his pocket. He clicked a keychain with a black button, and a sterling red ship with a wide, black spoiler materialized.

A *Foxfang Cruiser*. A sporty, show-off ship, nothing near anything the Colonies would install cloaking tech in. I thought back to River's cloaking cosmopod, then the visomessage aboard the Harmony: "*Aries knows nothing…Terrex knows too much*."

"Wait, hold on!" I called out, I took one step toward Ush, and the Boneman to my back rammed the butt of their gun into my chest.

"JEAN!" Ant kneeled to cradle me as I heaved for breath, red hot pain exploding between my lungs. "Are you okay?"

"Don't be so dramatic," Atticus R. nodded at the Boneman totting Ush to their ship, and they loaded her through the hatch as easily as if she were cargo. "They'll be fine in two to three avins. And, Captain, when you recover, my fine Foxfang's spoiler should still be in sight. Follow us back to my office, and we'll sort everything out, there."

"We're low on fuel!" Cad piped up.

Atticus holstered their hotshot. "And that's my problem how?" The brigand swaggered off to their ship while I struggled to my feet.

Pool held up their steel middle finger as the red ship roared to life, and left us in the lurch.

We were coming up hot on a small planet overgrown with forests so lush they wrapped the world in choking green. The only visual markers of settlement a poorly concealed metal outcropping, like a vine-lashed chimney draped over with old, dead branches. Churning green smoke.

The plants surrounding the streaker smoke curled away from it, shrivelled and blackened. "We're meeting them in their office, right?" I turned to Cad, drool pooling in one corner of his

mouth as he watched the smoke curl into the muddy orange sky over the forest. “Nelson, is this the place where–”

“No,” said the First Mate. “No way, are you kidding? Everyone had a place, and mine was in the garages. I’m talking Patra, Ulrinia…There was one minor storage unit on Tauceti, that’s how I, uh, got into the business. Just me, and the occasional sleeping guard. A few other inventory specialists…I always thought the harvesting technique was a bit more rustic.”

There was nothing rustic about the leaf-ladden factory we alighted in front of. A cobbled stone driveway lined the large clearing that allowed for the building. A few smaller ships parked off to the side. Sandcats with their arm-length whiskers emerged every now and again to sniff at the odd tire, or rest in the shadow of a hull.

“Atticus is going to kill me,” Nelson said. “I owe them, too. Not enough for them to extort me for nine-million drokens, I guess, but there’s no way they’ve forgotten.”

“We can’t risk this going sideways on two axises,” I noted. “Why don’t all of you wait in the craft? It only takes one of us to ask for an advance on Ush’s, uh, debt.”

“If something goes wrong, we wouldn’t be able to get to you in time,” said Ant.

“Not to mention numbers might be the only strength we have right now,” Pool said.

Ant reached into her pocket and pulled out the cranny. “Should I bring my hotshot?”

“They’ll be expecting that,” Cadbury pulled his toolbelt off of the back of his seat. “If no one is watching the ship, I want to put my tools away. Some of them are expensive, you know? For bargain-brand, anyway.”

The First Mate crept off to his sleepmodule.

When he returned, Ant, Pool, Cad and I climbed up through the hatch, and down to the forest floor.

The cobblestone driveway was uneven, the head-sized stones each chisheled with symbols and illustrations, serving more as canvases than paveway. A figure on one depicted a figure with one eye wielding a bow and arrow. Aiming it at a bounding sandcat. Another showed several one-eyed figures using a thick, intricate crosshatching of branches and leaves to close out the rain splattering off the roof above.

The images blurred, and were etched out entirely by tiremarks as we neared the entrance to the factory. The metal slab making up the door had a charred handle, as if it had been blasted with lasers. Or was, on a regular basis.

A straw-woven welcome rug greeted us on the other side. Black-dyed blades spelling out "NICE TO STREAK YOU, AGAIN!"

Cad smeared his boots across the mat, grimacing down at it.

We stepped over the decor to stride across a neat cockpit, given the vine and leaf-plastered outside of the building. The metal paneling was gleaming silver. Plants in black metal pots on either end of the sleek, batbuck-hide furniture lining the room.

An attendant straightened in their seat behind a desk across from us. They weren't human, but weren't Octil or Kaleidizen, either. The single eye in the center of their face rolling over each of us to take in the sight completely. Above the eye, a stoney protrusion, like a blunt, calloused arm, shaded their vision. It was of the same purple, pebbly texture as the rest of their skin, but possessed a deep gorge at the end of it. As if a bite had been taken out, or the arm had been burned. Green crust fringing the giant wound. Violet-blood pressing under the film of a large, long-healed scar.

"Can I help you?" said the attendant.

"Yes," I said. "We have a meeting with the factory manager."

The one-eyed attendant pressed a button. Held up one of eight stoney, stubby fingers until the intercom crackled above them. "*Send them in, Kuredge.*"

Kuredge pulled a lever, and the wall to the right of us cracked in two and opened.

"Hidden doors," Pool muttered, "always a great sign."

I led the way through.

The wall closed behind us, shutting us into a glass chute ablaze with fluorescent light, thrumming with gentle, instrumental music. I stumbled forward as the conveyer belt we'd stepped onto jerked forward, shuffling us along the glass tunnel as the music played on. The soundtrack to the reel of repetitive work cropping up on the factory floor, outside.

There were massive machines, dripping emerald oil, and vibrating at such a rate they seemed to blur at all times. A small conveyer belt guided metal pans of green, crystal chunks through the factory. One-eyed workers in thin aprons, holey gloves, and no respiration masks slammed their head appendages into the pans to crush the crystals into fine powder. Glittering green specks clinging to their brow arms. On occasion, a green sheen to the eye of a worker. Someone who used, as well as prepared, the product.

Woven throughout the floor were armed guards in orange spacesuits. Though, I wondered how often the hotshots were used on trespassers, and how often they were turned on the workers.

The belt beneath us ground to a stop outside a black door with a single letter stenciled on it in gold: *R*.

I opened the door unto Atticus R's office. Already, the terms of the meeting were skewed because of the variables that had gone unmentioned, such as the lanky witness in the lavender standing next to the Streak King. Atticus reclined in a green crystalline throne behind a black, metal desk littered with haphazard stacks of paper. The largest piles pushed to either side to

make an aisle for their crossed feet. Usher to one side of the desk, eyes fixed on the door ready to meet mine, and stony in a way I couldn't have read with one of her microscopes.

What drew my mouth wide open was a closer inspection of R's addition to the festivities: The purple stripes streaking diagonally across his face. Ends of his curled amber hair still singed from that accident. Wirro Key. The Cosmocraft Crapshoot chemist. Longtime friend of the Kylix.

Atticus's words blurred into a soup of muddled, muffled gibberish for a few avins before swimming back into cohesion. "What field did you drag these locustrats out of, anyway?"

"The same one your father was born in," Ush said.

Atticus pushed away from the desk to plant those blue boots on the shaggy green rug carpeting the office. "My father was born on the Hera, Lugomir," said R. "An original Griever. Direct, simple, and forged for survival." R strode around the desk to sit between the two piles of paperwork. Rested the hotshot across their lap to sift through the pages. "Locustrats are sneaky, thieving, secretive scum. Worming their way out of their responsibilities, their *debts*." R slapped a page down on the top of the pile to their right. "Shall I start with the most recent betrayal? Chronologically?"

"Here we go," Nelson cringed inward as if to brace himself for an impact.

"Nelson, you lying Streak-fiend!"Atticus R. shouted with such intensity that spittle flew out of their mouth. They stabbed a finger at Cadbury. "You owe me eighty drokens, *plus* interest. I haven't forgotten about the biggest mistake of my life–"

"Don't be so dramatic, R," I cut in. "With the looks of these facilities, you make at least twenty times as much per Drulk."

"I don't mean a betrayal in the *business* realm, Captain Sable," R rained shipping contracts upon me, some scrawled in the signatures of politicians I only knew from spurts of inside-Terrex info on the radio. "Cadbury wasn't just some inventory specialist. Sure, he kept my logs, kept my ships in the best shape, but Nelson Cadbury was my *best friend*."

This, Cad had never divulged.

Ush sucked her teeth, a hard wet pop. "As if," said Doctor Lugomir. "If you really cared about Cad, then how come–" The question hit an invisible wall.

"No," said Atticus, shoving to their feet, again. "Say it! How come *what*, Doctor? How come I let him use Streaker without warning him about Cyano? Is *that* what you were gonna say?"

Ush studied the carpeting. Straightened the black collar of her lucky labcoat. "Forget it."

"No," grinned R. "I don't think I *will*. If you want to pull out a soapbox and start claiming innocence, you're one hell of a hypocrite, Lugomir."

"I said *forget it*!" Ush barked, sweeping one pile off of the desk with a wild flail of her arm. The papers sloughing off to the shag below.

"Why?" said Atticus. "Because your friends, here, don't know, right? No one knows, because *I've* held up my end of the agreement for yushes–"

"We'll pay, R," Ush sighed. "That's what we're here to tell you, okay? But there's some hiccups…Workable, very manageable hiccups…"

"Does Wirro have to be here?" I said.

"Oh?" Atticus cast a sideways glance at their friend. "Damn, this crew is full of surprises. Wirro, are you *also* acquainted with these thieving grubs?"

Key answered too fast, "Of course not!"

A pang of…I don't know what. Not betrayal, but not relief, burned in my belly. So this was how we were going to play it. "How do *you* know Wirro, Atticus?"

Atticus' furrowed brow eased. They flipped their hair. "Wirro's my new right hand, if you must know. I've been leaving the laboratory in an actual scientist's hands," they said. "Going too rustic, that was my mistake. Cad had the brute drive, but he's just a Kepleran bumpkin and a Taucetian crook."

"Watch your mouth!" I said. The force behind my words surprised me. So what if Nelson was a thief, I wasn't just going to let some poison-peddling thug drag my First Mate's name through the mud.

Atticus smirked. "Seems the two of you are thick as thieves," they chuckled. "Cad was useless when it came to security matters, anyhow. Not an innovator, by any stretch of the imagination, just a fixer. I suppose that's how that piece of garbage you parked in my driveway is still flying." R sauntered to Wirro to throw an arm around the chemist's shoulders. "Product Officer Key has only improved the potency and shelf life of the Streak since I brought him on."

"I see," I said.

"Don't look at me like that, Jean," Wirro snapped. "Some of us aren't willing to see how many friends we can lose before we reach a breaking point." His nostrils flared, the protrusion in his throat dipping and resurfacing like a memory one preferred to keep buried deep down, but couldn't manage to. "Fed died, and we weren't *better* for it, everything only got worse. Bactericlean doesn't feed my crew, and hormones don't keep the tank full."

"You *do* know each other," Atticus giggled. "I love it. First that visomessage, then this. One dramatic crew you've got under your watch, Captain. I'd watch my back if I were you."

"What do you mean?" said Ant.

At the same time, I said, “Let’s just make a deal, already.”

“Oh, Ush and I go way back,” R ignored me. “You’d know, Adams, how every illegitimate practice usually starts out by-the-book. Orders gone awry…Though, this time around, we followed them to a T.”

“Don’t,” Ush surged forward, but Atticus snatched up their hotshot. Leveled the end of the gold-banded gun at the Doctor.

“Why shouldn’t I?” Atticus R asked.

“We’ll pay,” said Ush.

“In six–*almost seven*–years, you’ve hardly made a dent in my requested donation.”

“Blackmail isn’t very motivating,” I cut in. “Enough of this. Look, you need money. Well, we need fuel *and* funds. You won’t get a droken of that nine drok if we can’t get to our destination.”

“Who’s being cryptic now,” R raised an eyebrow. “What destination?”

“That’s confidential,” Ush said.

“Okay,” Atticus brace a finger on the trigger, sweeping the hotshot over the room. “If I don’t get answers, then there’s no deal.”

“WAIT!” Wirro screamed, shielding his eyes.

“The Furthers!” Pool blurted out, scales trembling in a rippling wave of golden anxiety. “Like, the myth. They’re real, and we’re set to meet them. One of them, like a school of fish, sort of. It’s actually kind of remarkable–Up until now, it was thought Earthborne languages were confined to the regional star system, but seamammal, of all dialects–”

Atticus cocked the hotshot. “It’s getting clearer and clearer who I should make a point of first.”

Ant scrambled for her cranny. Fumbling with it as she jerked it out of her pocket. Reached inside to pull out the black metal suitcase. “It’s all about *this*.”

“Ant?” I said.

“No, no,” Atticus urged. “By all means, share with the class, Adams.”

Antiope undid the latches. Slowly pulled the top open til the radiant antilight poured out and over Atticus and Wirro’s disbelieving faces.

The hum of the silent storm lashing against the glass bottle high-pitched music to my ears. Like some faraway voice, calling out to be released.

Wirro shook his head, “The Kaleidizens have really gotten desperate if these are the measures they’ve turned to.”

“These are the measures Terrex drove us to!” Pool snapped.

“This is as good as a firelion in the lunarlamb den,” Wirro said. “And you mean to *sell* this?” When no one addressed the question, Wirro grasped my arm. Just under the shoulder, wrenching me halfway across the desk. “Jean, is this your higher ground?”

I growled, thrashing free of his grip. “The higher ground is a luxury my crew can’t afford.”

“I recovered it from a crime scene,” Ant explained as Atticus R gingerly clasped the bottle. Their fingers trembled around the glass, and white wisps of steam curled up from their pinkening palms, but the Streak King only had eyes for the Blunder.

“Crime scene, eh?” Atticus chuckled. “Funny, that’s what they call the Respiration Institute, nowawash–”

“R–” Ush started.

"Don't be modest, Lugomir," Atticus didn't look away from the black hole. The endless, minature storm. Palm growing crisper by the moment, fried flakes peeling off and drifting to the shag carpet. "You come to me with empty hands and empty promises, then hand me the most valuable thing in your possession, which is *also* the most valuable thing in the galaxy. I think it's about time I got to spend some quality time with the Blunder, and *past time* your crew reviewed your extensive, impressive resume."

Despite myself, I was growing more curious with every vague new detail. "Shut up!" I forced myself to say. "We're not interested in your gossip, R."

"No?" Atticus said. "Let me skip right to the facts, then: Doctor Usher Lugomir was set to earn her League of Galactic Healers certification the summer of Twenty-One Seventy-Three. Instead, she was given an extensive government-issued exam, enrolled into a rigorous roster of exclusive courses, and graduated from Uranus U in Twenty-One Seventy-One." R feined ignorance, tapping their temple as if to shake loose a thought. "Hmm, what else happened that summer?"

Pool eyed Ush, now. The doctor avoiding their gaze. "The Purple Plague," said the Translation Officer.

Ant's expression soured. "The Respiration Institute?" she said. "They're in the pocket of the Colonies, basically a research branch."

Pool said, "So Ush worked for the Colonies," they said. "So what? We've all done things to get by."

"Of course," Atticus waved the hotshot dismissively. "Usually, though, doctors are paid to *act*, not to sit by and watch–Oh, pardon me–I mean *research* diseases progressing."

"There's–There's no such thing as an instant cure," Pool said, glaring longways at Ush. "No one knew how it was spreading at first, let alone how to treat it…"

The Purple Plague had come on suddenly as an epidemic. Streaker had just been painstakingly refined, new machinery developed just to enhance the intoxicating effects of the powderized crystal.

Everyone was using it, so when a fraction of the users began choking on purple spores, the connection wasn't drawn. Not til the fraction multiplied, and the deathtoll rocketed from hundreds to three hundred-thousand within one yush.

The summer of Seventy-One was remembered, now, for just three things: The purple sludge spackling every walkway in the Colonies, the conspiracies that swelled to such a fever pitch Athena Adams herself had completed a Terrex-wide tour rallying against disinformation, and the rapid influx of space debris as loved ones disposed of bodies they couldn't afford steel coffins or cremation for out the airlock.

"The link between contaminated Streaker batches and Cyano was made *before* the outbreak even began," Atticus said. "It's the whole reason I was paid to distribute it. The whole reason Doctor Lugomir was paid to study it."

Ush said, "No!" at the same time that Pool, Ant, Cad, Wirro, and I said, "*WHAT?*"

"We all know the Colonies don't like competition with other galaxies, other *species*…" said R. "Well, Terrans don't like competition with other *humans*. They need just enough Grievers to keep their food farmed and their waste disposed of. Anyone else is extraneous, a spare…"

How had Starling described the Kaleidizens? Weeds that needed a gardener.

Ush crumbled into a shroud of black linen, and heaved over the carpet. Thick tears rolling down her face and dribbling off her chin. Still, she made no effort to deny the claims.

"Ush?" Pool's voice had hardened into something harsh and unrecognizable. Stern and ladden with hate. "Ush, explain yourself."

Ush shook her head. Mouthed, but no words came forth.

"Ush!" Pool said more urgently. Scales bristling as their form lengthened. Spikes growing faintly curved, and more than faintly sharper. "I *SAID* EXPLAIN YOURSELF! Don't just let this lowlife slander you like that–I'm–I'm your best friend, remember?" Pool blinked back tears, orange eyes so watery Ush was reflected back six times in perfect clarity. "Doctors don't kill…*right*?"

Ush snapped to attention, raising her head to nod. "Yes," she said.

"Yes I'm your best friend?" Pool's gills rasped as the Kaleidizen hyperventilated.

"Yes," said Ush. "Yes, I did it…I knew."

With these words, the Doctor stole the air from my lungs. As Atticus R laughed, I choked on the blood of the plagued. "You knew?" I said. "They could've come up with something–*some* treatment–so much earlier–*So* much earlier…"

"And they did," Atticus assured me. "CyanAway was *developed* septurs into discovery. But the Colonies can't research the progression of diseases they treat…"

"Withholding treatment is a Galactic Offense," Ant said.

"Not when study of an infected specimen would save more lives than it costs," R noted. "Save *Terrans* from ever contracting it in the first place. The spores of late-stage coughers produce Cyanoglobin. The key ingredient in the Cyano vaccine. Ush would know, she assisted in its development harvesting spores for study. The senior board called them purple gold. Each

lungful was worth millions, priceless in the realm of scientific advancement. Of course, not a cent trickled down to the surviving families… Hell, they didn't even get the entire corpse. By the time the Colonies shipped the cadaver home, all the organs were confiscated for research. Replaced with–"

"Old newspaper," Wirro said. "The stories–What I was always told were stories…"

"It's true," said Ush. "I never held a hotshot for them, but in trying to keep from becoming their dog, I became–" She lurched to her feet, drew an arm across her eyes, which did nothing to slow the flow of tears. "I became a monster."

"Your oaths!" Wirro shook his head.

"Oaths mean nothing when the only thing you've got to your name is a diploma to wipe your ass with," Ush said. "I was hungry! I had to take out loans just to enroll at U.U. and my family was expecting me to send cash back to Gliese the moment I touched down! Accelerating my studies was the only way I could see out of a bad spot. When Terrex put a full plate in front of me, I ate with the utensils I was given!"

"You're sick!" Wirro hocked to spit at the Doctor's boots. "We do what we must to get by, but that's–*YOU'RE*–" Wirro clasped a hand over his mouth. Knelt as chunky orange vomit burbled past his fingers, and spilled onto the shag.

"Damn you, Key!" Atticus exclaimed. "You better have a healthy supply of that BacteriShine, or whatever it is! This rug cost eight-hundred drokens!"

"So, this whole time…?" Pool uttered, backing into the wall. Their spikes loosed a painting of R splayed across the very rug Wirro had just sullied. "This whole time I thought Adams was the war criminal–It was *you*." Pool swayed as oozing green venom coated their layered fangs. "It was *you*."

Atticus set the Blunder on the desk to empty a glass of water perched on the edge of their desk onto the vomit stain. With one hand still clutching their hotshot, they swept a small pile of paperwork onto the carpet to blanket the stain. Tamped the makeshift towel with their boot.

"I'm sorry," Ush croaked. "It's all I can say…There aren't any words…They're all too small for such a big mistake."

"Try this one," Cadbury cut in. He shook something long and purple loose from his sleeve. "DUCK!"

Wirro doubled over, again. This time, splashing R's boot as Pool and Ant dove to the floor, along with Ush.

I lunged forward to snatch the Blunder from Atticus R's desk. The bottle steamed upon impact with my palms. Lightning lashing across the artificial atmosphere inside to deliver a singeing burn to my hand. "FUCK!" I fumbled with it. Tossed it once, just to catch it in the other hand, where it burned hotter, still.

R glanced up from their soaking boot to grasp at the air as I knelt to slide the bottle across the shag carpet to my floored crew. The black hole slid past Ant, then Pool, but Ush's arm bolted out to catch it. "You've had this coming for a while, Doc!"

Atticus raised their hotshot, but I caught the end in my horns. Bucked to throw it to the side as R squeezed the trigger. Molten steel sliding down the wall from the deep impact site in the thick plating.

I swung my head to strike again, but the heavy metal weapon met my head. Gold banding bending around the curves of my horns as the long side of the gun bruised my cheek and rattled my brains.

The floor seemed to shift vertically to meet me. Slamming into me at an even greater force than the hotshot. Black fuzzing in around my vision. Though I was pleased enough that the hot gun remained lodged in my horns.

Nelson had his opening, swinging the purple hammer in a wide arc across the office at Atticus R's head.

Even activating their helmet didn't help Atticus. Not with the force behind the lunge. Not with the look in Cad's eye. The hammer bouncing off, once, but leaving a hairline crack that Nelson burst through with another, grunting swing.

"*Security! SECUR–RAAAAUGGGH!*" R's panicked words choked off into a wet, lapping gurgle as something round, red, and misshappen rolled to my tip of my boots.

Glass rained into the open mouth of Atticus R's head. Tongue stretched out, swollen, as if to catch snowflakes. One eye bulging and wide open, while the other–along with R's entire nose, was pried off. Both clinging to a narrow strip of flesh coating pale bone shards, loosely attached at the ear of the Streak King.

Atticus R's head had been torn off, yeah, roughly shorn at the neck, but also pried open. Throbbing purple brains swelling out of their skull until it stilled, and deflated. Giving way to a flood of thick, clear cranial liquid as it leaked out onto the shag carpet.

Cadbury wiped the front of his helmet clean as the glass shards settled. Rising from his crouch over R's twitching, eviscerated body. Chest cavity opened as if to draw in scavengers to pick the ribs.

Flesh clinging to the purple hammer in the First Mate's hands. "After everything we've been through, there was no way I was going to sit back and watch my crew walk right into a

snake's den," he said. He cast a long look down on Ush. "Even if some of them are snakes, themselves."

Ush rose to her feet, dusted the glass and flesh off of her black labcoat. "Thank you for relieving me of my debt, Nelson."

"Who said anything about *that*?" Wirro cut in. "After Fed–" His voice hitched, but he pressed on. "After he *died,* I realized I had to start playing a different game. Even if it involved waiting." He drew a hand across his mouth, flicked the vomit and blood onto the wall, and pressed a button on the desk. All in the same motion. "Kuredge, it's done. I'm relying on you to communicate the change in management to the entire factory by the start of the second lunch break. Understood?"

Kuredge, the secretary, didn't miss a beat. Their voice burbling up from the feed in the desk. "*I understand, Mr. Key. Congratulations. I'll see to it everyone is notified by then*."

## CHAPTER SIX

The nearest Octilavian moons were pale and as small as fingernails from where we idled. The most isolated Milky Way settlements growing fewer and further between. The sparse planets that did drift by flooded over with spoiled water like Earth before the Eviction Exodus. Virtually uninhabitable. Virtually.

"Whaletail gets excellent reception, all things considered," Ush noted from the window.

From his seat, his favorite tie-dye suit still streaked in washed out pink from his scrubbing efforts, Cadbury grumbled, "And Starling called Vuziliak backwater. I'll be surprised if this region even has modernized plumbing." The First Mate's hip-length dreadlocks, thick and brightly black and grown out lovingly since his Pledge of Peace, had been shorn off. Pool standing ritualistically behind Cad as he presented his locks to be severed, and burned one-by-one in the minicinerator beneath the dashboard.

"Let's not stick around long enough to find out," I said.

Since we'd taken off from the factory, a kind of double-vision had overtaken my usual sight. In this alternate vision, Cadbury rained purple steel down on his crewmate, Usher, instead of Atticus R. And, if he had, I wasn't sure I'd have turned him away from the Kylix. Whatever I was made to be, to do, humans could be and do just as worse.

"Here, here," Pool seconded, though their gaze didn't wander from the edges of the Caniscen. The Translations Officer hadn't exchanged any direct words with Ush in the two washes since the Atticus R incident. Had barely even looked at her, though they scarcely managed to pry their eyes from the window.

We'd rocketed nearer to the Caniscen Galaxy than any humans had for decades. Our ship submerged in lavender dust more often than not. Clearing only to allow us glimpses of the pyramidal Octil satellites at the edge of the nearest arm.

"It looks just the same, even though everything's changed," Pool sighed. They'd emerged from their module without their gauntlet, towash, and had been running their golden, downy palm over their scarred stump every few avins. "So strange to be banished from your birthplace…"

"Tell me about it," Cadbury offered his hand for Pool to hold tight to as I tipped the wheel to the side to spin the windshield away from the sight. Pool guided his hand to the thick, purple rootwork of scars running across the end of their stump. The First Mate stroked it with such tenderness that I very suddenly realized Pool and Nelson had begun having sex in the last few washes. "Are you worried about them coming after us? The Eldeniv?"

Pool's spikes trembled as they pressed closer to the window, as if to burst through, feel that gold dust on their skin, the wind through their scales. "After Kemi, I'm more worried they'll come after *you*." There was a stony honesty to their tone, the same used by someone simply laying out a fact. "You know, when I was first granted counsel with them, I was thrilled. It was the first and only time, a privilege for Kaleids. The Eldeniv never leave *Clutcherust*, 'New Home,' so I'd never met my cymar, had never met anyone alive during the Skirmishes." They slumped to the floor, sliding with their back against the wall. Eyes watering and nostrils flaring from slits to heaving holes in the center of their face. "I thought if I could use what I studied–use *language*–to defend myself, I could convince them. That's the power of words, right? Exchange of ideas across cultures."

"You're the reason I'm alive," said Antiope, tracing the little scar on the back of her neck. "You *and* Ush. Your words work, Vy-Kaleidizen, but others have to be willing to listen."

"Besides," Cad helped Pool to their feet, patting his hammer, "I can take care of myself. Humans aren't as fragile as you think."

Pool planted a kiss on his cheek, then his mouth. They indulged in it a moment before Pool pulled back to say, "No, but you *are* about as foolish."

Antiope activated the visojecter. Our position a blue blip on the now-expansive map of the Milky Way. She used her fingers to zoom in, planets sweeping past to pinpoint us isolated. "Norma, eight, five, sixty-seven, nine, three…The coordinates are exactly right. We should be right on top of the rendezvous point, on top of Whaletail."

Cadbury tapped the pressure gauge. The little dial flickering a moment in the middle of the scale before drifting nearer to the faded green middle. Nearer, but wavering to one side to kiss the yellow warning strip. "Equilibrium is a little off, Captain." He squeezed his groaning stomach. "That explains why I've been nauseous for the last hundred planeons."

I scanned the dashboard for other inconsistencies. Air pressure was one of those things humans were more sensitive to. It would take the ship hanging upside down for me to even notice a difference in the cabin. If space was the same, but the dial claimed it was acting differently upon us, what did that mean?

Pool said, "Anyone leave a toaster plugged in? Those things throw us off all the time, right?"

"They sap more electricity, drain our fuel," Ush confirmed. "But I don't see how a toaster could make things…*Crooked*?" She stuck out her leg, measured it against the floor. "I feel

perfectly balanced, my spine is straight and so is my knee, but the floor is diagonal to me. Unless I'm still really hungover, it seems we're off-axis as well as over-pressurized."

"Maybe there's some kind of mistake," Ant pinched the holomap leaping out of the visojecter, zooming into where we hovered. We were between two planets. Both small, and without the vassal indicators. Truly in rural space, where the planets were just peripherals to even Terrex, with coordinates for labels instead of proper names. This could only mean there was nothing of value or note within dozens of planeons. Maybe hundreds. No way one of these planets had a powerful enough pull to act on us, even that would be something the Colonies could learn from.

I checked the fuel gauge, beside the steering wheel. We were stable, the dial still comfortably hugging the "FULL" label. Wirro had charged a pair of plant workers with siphoning the fuel from Atticus R's luxury craft. It wasn't much, but the quality of the ions was good enough to guarantee the Galiton drive return us to to our usual Open Space orbiting grounds when this was all done with. Or, if all went to plan, somewhere even better.

The fuel, his silence on Ush's past, and the promise of a new age of availability in Open Space were Wirro's parting gifts. Atticus' lab was medical grade, as Ush noted when Wirro gave us a walk-through. He showed us the massive freezer, the rows of cabinets, stored with valuables of every variety and overstocked with everything considered sparse for Grievers.

In return, we didn't question the state of the plant, the safety of the people working there, if all of them were adults. If any of them had ever been paid in money or food, anything but Streaker. The only thing I managed to ask was regarding Wirro's position on the Crapshoot.

"*Atticus was right about one thing*," he said. "*I mean more, here. I can do more, here, too, for everyone. Now, I'd remind you to stay dangerous, but don't you have a bomb to get back to?*"

"What's your read, First Mate?" I asked. "If everything else looks good, what are the potential issues?"

Cad stroked his stubbly chin, eyes glazing over as if to look through into the inner workings of the ship. "According to the gauge, the Kylix gained half a ton of weight overdrain–"

"But our ears haven't popped since yesterday," Ant noted.

Cad nodded, "Even stranger, we haven't been pushing the Kylix especially hard. The Galiton does all the work usually reserved for the engine, we're saving fuel, electricity… Nothing should be out of order if *everything's* in order. Honestly, Captain, I don't know what to make of it."

Pool said, "Maybe Whaletail knows something," they fiddled with the handheld radio and cell. Linking the long thin wires. "This is *their* stomping grounds, right? There could be some kind of high-pressure anomaly in this area…" When the Translations Officer settled onto a station, though, the interlacing chatter of the live air between sources gave way to a high-pitched, warbling screech. Like the loudest animal ever was being butchered by the sickest piece of shit imaginable.

"SHUT IT OFF!" My words were silent, smothered by the screeching, but Pool read my lips and switched the radio off.

"Sorry, Captain," they said.

"Don't be sorry," I said over the fading ringing in my ears. There weren't bleeding, but they throbbed as well as any injury might. "Just–Just tell me what the fuck that was. Another Distance Disruption?"

Pool shook their head. Studied the radio for any malfunction, took out the batteries, and put them back in. Inspected the antennae. "No," they said. "That was Close-Range Feedback."

Antiope's words rattled around in my brain like that rock in our fuel tank: "*We should be right on top of the rendezvous point, on top of Whaletail*."

Unless, that was, they were on top of us.

"Everyone buckle up!" I threw myself into the pilot's seat. Clicked my own seatbelt over my lap, and wrenched the steering wheel upward. Sending the Kylix into a turbulent, off-kilter spin that made the speed dial hug the highest number.

Now, the pressure gauge went wild. G-forces fluctuating as we rotated diagonally. Ship spinning tail over nose over tail. Pool's stray scales raining intermittently from the ceiling, then floor. Anything that wasn't tied down–the green phone receiver, the broom to the back of the ship, the Crew Bowl under the dashboard–springing free of the walls and shelves to ring against our helmets. Which had activated due to the erratic movement. I only hoped Tendon was hanging on tight to whatever wire he was chewing on.

"Captain–*JEAN!* I'm going to–" Ush's face shaded over a deep purple, and, as we completed a turn, her vomit splashed across the windshield.

The only time I had ever seen the Doctor succumb to motion sickness.

Cadbury gripped the cushion of his seat, tie-dye billowing around him like a flag caught in the strongest wind. He tried to say something, but his words came out as a breathy, hitching rasp.

To his side, Antiope's head lulled against the back of her seat. Her eyes popped open, then closed, a pattern that repeated itself until they were closed for longer and longer periods.

Pool was the only one who could manage to stand, straining against the intense gravity to clamber to my seat. "HAVE YOU LOST YOUR MIND?!"

"We're Grievers," I didn't let up on the steering wheel. "We'll live."

"And the Terran?" said Pool, nodding at Antiope.

"Exactly," I jerked the wheel to the side, reached under the dash to shift the axis of rotation. Now, the Kylix tilted to the side, and spun even faster, and more erratingly. Wavering as it did. "They can only stand it for so long before–"

The intercom crackled. "*OKAY, OKAY! WE GIVE UP! JUST STOP!*"

I did. At last, releasing the steering wheel and allowing the cosmocraft to right itself. The ship's belly rolling to its rightful place below as the gauges all corrected. "We?" I repeated. So they were still speaking in the plural sense, yet this voice did *not* belong to Whaletail.

"*My crew*," said the voice. "*My family*."

I gripped the wheel, again, but hesitated to jerk it back. Send the both of us endless rolls. Sure, no Griever would sink so low as to use cloaking tech, but no Constable would refer to their dragoon–their crew–as a family. "What *are* you?"

"*A desperate person with hungry friends*," said the spy. "*Same as you*."

"How are you–?" Cad scanned the dashboard. "The microphone is turned off."

This time, when the voice spoke, a dulling, suppressed effect had been laid over the words so it was hardly recognizable as the same speaker. Voice altering tech, a staple for those with obsessions of privacy. "*Radio tech is kind of our thing. Recognize this: Centaurus, Six, One, Nineteen, Two*–"

Ant threw the middle dial to the radio to the other side, let the staticy soup of planets buzz before settling on CallCast. She eyed the clock. Nineteen avins to the Ninth auron. "*This is Farer Ferra, the line hasn't rung in a couple of axons. I'd love to tune into an artist we all love and miss, Libby Kissel with 'Distain and the Stars…'"*

"It's you," said Ant, and her voice was as even as it'd ever been. "The black hole, how'd you know to lead me to it?"

"*We meant to lead you to Drew Davenon's crew,*" said the spy, in their usual voice. "*I understand why the Kaleids do what they do, but not every single Terrex pup is guilty. Given the right information, maybe even some would join the cause–Their families have the right to collect their bodies.*"

Ant said, "So the coordinates–"

"*Other dragoons*," our spy admitted. "*It's really not personal, Adams. You just happened to follow the clues to the weapon. Anyone who had it would have to be persuaded to hand it over. You just happened to have the information, all we had to do was tap in."*

"Information," I repeated. The Kylix bobbed as a comet streaked past planeons away, sending out a rippling shockwave. "It was you." I shook my head to myself, the ghosts of Finn, Starling, and XG-L walking through me to chill me to my soul. "You think you're some kind of revolutionary? Pulling stunts like that–treating Grievers like we're disposable–is just the kind of strategy the Colonies was built on!"

"*Believe me, starshine*," said the spy. "*We're nothing like the Harmony crew*."

"Starshine?" I couldn't recall using the term of endearment anywhere but aboard the Kylix. Well, that and in private with Antiope. "That's *Captain* to you, coward!"

"*Very well, Captain Sable,*" said the spy.

"Now," I thundered, "you owe my crew an explanation for wasting our time, prying into our ship, brains, and beds, and forcing our hand on the Harmony."

"*Perseus Arm*," said the spy, in their usual voice. Not bothering to mask it behind the Whaletail apparatus, or the radio filter. "*Near here, just fifteen planeons south in the direction of the Neolevy Quadrant. Sixteen, Four, Thirty-Nine, Twelve–"*

"No," I said. "No more coordinates, no more jerking us around."

"It's okay, Jean," Antiope entered the information into the visojecter. "They know who we are, but we know who she is, too. If they keep stalling, we'll just go to the Colonies ourselves to take out the bounty on her."

"Her?" I said. I didn't make assumptions based on the sound of someone's voice, one couldn't and expect to be accurate.

Antiope clarified, "Only one person could carry out such a sophisticated ruse. The Furthers is just a honeypot. Chapter Eleven in the Spymaster Manifesto: Covert Collection Tactics."

"You don't mean–?" Ush began, glancing at the intercom.

Ant nodded. Held down the microphone button to speak through the intercom. "Estimated arrival in one-thousand axons," she announced. "We'll see you, then, Captain Crest."

The Peripherals of the Milky Way were clustered around the two dancing giant stars, red, swollen, and blazing through their final fuel supply within. The Twin Torches had been dying for millions of yushes, and would burn out at a billion. Not exactly imminent death for anyone occupying the sparse planets nearby, but enough of a drag to look forward to that not but the most desperate Grievers limped through space to settle them.

I guided the Kylix past the sight of the swirling, mirrored suns. The angular tail of the sleek, steel ship in front of us leading me along a roundabout path clearly meant to disorient most passengers, though I never lost my coordination, and never stopped keeping track of the escape routes. If I turned on the galiton drive at the right moment, we might be able to throw them off. At the right velocity, at the right angle, we could ram the dragoon into one of the rocky shards careening out a small debris belt rotating in a disk around the nearest moon.

The battered steel ship glided over the ring of debris. Shards of metal, tattered, frozen spacesuits, and pieces of shredded ships of the past swirling in a junknado around the pale lavender moon. Retired geysers spewing gray dust into the atmosphere, thickening the permanent cloud wrapping around the little moon that snowed the dust back down onto the tiny village beneath it.

While the settlement on the mountainous, canyon-ridden planet the moon orbitted was small, with a couple hundred structures to speak of, the village on the moon was microscopic in comparison. The largest building a long, steel barn, with rusted walls. Flaming cometcows grazed on tendrils of blackened vine peering out of the layer of gray dust settled on the ground. A dozen of them lowing, tails flicking at buzzing moonmoths, blue fur consumed with steady fire, licking off of the cows in smoking wisps.

“Ant?” I said.

She activated the visojecter map. “According to scraps of colloquial mentions in recovered logs, this moon is known as Medusa. There’s notes about the local snake population. The actual planet it orbits–Morrow–is also colloquially named. Their actual information is filed under Weiriton-400-H-11-3 and Weiriton 400-H-11-3-y.”

It always truck me how the Colonies didn't even have it in them to acknowledge lands they considered unruly or unuseful by name. Peripherals, the run-off that the Colonies slurped up without any real intention to densely populate the bodies. Not given so much as an official name to refer to as, because no one referred to them.

The dragoon pulled up and over a vast field of wheat between a smattering of smaller structures. Steel and metal, like the barn, but with black vines creeping along the walls and over the rooftops. The roofs of some of them, too, were strangely shaped. Cosmocrafts nested into the center of the sloping planes to rest atop the buildings.

Just a dozen or so houses, and an even smaller amount of people visible. All with their helmets on, so I knew the atmosphere didn't support oxygen introduction. Guiding stray cattle back into the steel gates spaced out wide before the barn, and tending to the golden stalks sprouting from the dust.

At once, two giant panels swung outwards from the roof of the barn, a huge hatch. "*We'll chat inside*," came Crest's voice. "*More privacy where it smells like flaming dung*."

"This wash just gets better and better," Ush said as the tipster hovered over the barn. Alighted as I did, parking the Kylix in one corner of the hay-blanketed loft. The dragoon backed into another, stilling to an idle, then shutting off with a flash of the headlights. The boarding hatch on top of the ship popped open.

Cad hesitated a moment, watching me, before I nodded. He unlatched our own hatch. Despite the barn's oxygenation, all of us activated our helmets as the pungent, charred scent of seared shit wafted inside the craft.

To keep the smell from sticking to our upholstery, we scrambled up the ladder and out of the craft. Stepping out into the barn as a lone, red-suited figure emerged from the dragoon. The

helmet was fogged, so I couldn't make out the face until she strode across the bed of hay and stretched a gloved hand out to me. She wore a faint smirk, gray eyes gleaming. The woman wasn't completely Terran. Her complexion paler than mine, but darker than Antiope's. Her bouncy, voluminous, coffee-brown curls framed her face, accented her eyes so it seemed she glared through a jungle to fix them on me. "Captain Sable, I presume."

Antiope crept around the woman, crouched to inspect her verdant suit. The stitching. Her boots, tall, gray, and scuffed. There was something verifiable about the woman. An air of importance, like the one that clung to Antiope, like the one Starling tried to cultivate around himself. "It really is you."

"It's good to see you again," Olivia Crest winked. "So, it's true that you go by Antiope these days? That's a pretty name."

Ant frowned, deeply, blushing. "I know it is," she spat.

"Wait," Cad looked between Ant and the maroon. "You two know each other?"

"Olivia–Uh, Captain Crest graduated with the class before mine," Ant explained. "Class of Seventy-Two, right?"

"The one and only," the spymaster chuckled. "Hey, does Colony College still do that archaic pledge of loyalty before every ceremony?"

"So often you'd think we'd forget three words: Vincere–"

–Sortem–"

"--Nostram," said Ant. The United Colonies motto. Complex translation: "To conquer our destiny." Rough, more accurate, translation: "To win our lot."

"Hold on," I cut into the banter, turning to Antiope. "You went to college with *the* Olivia Crest–the deserter Constable, spymaster of space–and you never mentioned it until now?"

Ant looked to the hay-strewn floor of the barn. “We weren’t friends or anything–Well, I wanted us to be–But we didn’t talk to each other, it–it was irrelevant!”

“It was before my name meant anything, anyhow,” Crest waved. “When all I had was my good looks.” She flashed that easy smirk at Ant, again. “Let me make sure I’m getting this right: XG-J 2151, also known as Captain Jean Sable. You, in the blue boots, must be First Mate Nelson Cadbury. No scales and only two eyes, I’m thinking Doctor Usher Lugomir. Your Translations Officer: Capable, fierce, cranky Pool Vy-Kaleidizen. Then, of course, our crowning jewel amidst the lowly dust of Medusa: Constable Antiope Adams.”

“Jewel?” Ant and I said at the same time, and not in the same tone.

Captain Crest clapped the side of the darkened dragoon. Her crew filed out, Liv introducing each as they strode to her side.

For all the rumors about the whistle-blowing rogue herself, there had been little mention of her crew. Not that anyone would believe such a description, anyhow.

There were two humans, one Terran and one not. First Mate Janelle, a Griever with her silvery, glittering Kaleidizen-scale nails. And freckled Ecology Officer Lynnie, who made a point to compliment Ush on surviving their League lessons, as they had since dropped out of the academy. Then, an Octilavian, with one deepset, inken eye above his eight moss-covered tentacles. Astrionics Officer Yilig.

Finally, there was a xenogene, with flashing eyes: Long, black vertical pupils amid a stormy, gray iris. The type, I supposed, that might match my own tail if attached to the creature of origin. They sported spotted leopard’s ears and a pink-and-purple mottled nose that twitched unless they licked it. Pilot XG-S 2149, who the crew referred to as “Sootfoot” for the black-furred paws at the end of their legs, in place of human feet.

Each of them in deep red suits, unstained, and fresh. As if that was something to be proud.

XG-S and I sniffed each other's ears, though I made the mistake of inhaling too quickly. The information folded into Sootfoot's sweat thousand-fold, washing over me so my skin grew fevered like an overloading computer.

What the difference was between this and the usual sample, I couldn't place. Though I did note the pilot's gold badge, a flaming five-petaled flower. The mark of an official Star-Naught.

Olivia Crest greeted Yilig the Octil with a head-on kiss, burying her face in his writhing mass of tentacles. She disentangled herself, looking to us. "Don't look so scandalized, isn't inter-kind coupling your crew's entire schtick? Xenos with humans, humans with Kaleids…"

"Don't make it sound like some kind of fetish, Crest," Ant said.

"You don't know anything about us!" Cad gritted. "Not us, and not Pool!"

"No?" Crest grinned wickedly. She let her eyes zig-zag over Cadbury. His worn suit, as all of ours were, reflective silver patches sewn into the knees, elbows, and over a tear along the side. "I know their twenty-fifth year rut is upon them, and you're looking to get a piece of the action."

"Hey!" Pool protested as tears welled in Cad's eyes.

His face was flush and radiating rage. "Who do you think you are? That's private information you're talking about–"

"We had a bet going," Crest went on, unplussed. "I guess I owe Yigil ten drokens. There's only a week left in the season, and all Pool's been thinking of is–"

"ENOUGH!" I barked, bracing my hands on Crest's sturdy red suit and shoving her into her crewmates. "Sneaky, cowardly spies don't get to speak as if bugs aren't their biggest weapon."

"It was your ship that decided to take the Blunder out of the Kaleidizen's hands," Crest righted herself. "I didn't choose to spy on you, you gave me no choice in the matter."

"There's always a choice," I said.

"Not when we're running out of water!" Crest threw up her hands. "Not when you have people looking up to you, expecting you to take care of them, and you can barely take care of yourself."

"Oh, get out a soapbox, why don't you," Ush rolled her eyes. She feined wiping tears. "Poor Terrans experiencing hardship for the first time ever."

"Not everyone who looks like a Terran *is*, jackass!" Ecologist Lynnie piped up. They were pale, for sure, with thick, black eyebrows, and tattoos of palm-sized green leaves crawling up their arms. "I was born on Kepler, you're the ones with the Earthborne on your crew!"

"Don't talk about Ant that way!" I shot back.

"Kepler?" Cad blinked. "I thought I detected a Bildwin accent…"

Lynnie said, "I was raised in the valley."

"So was I," said Cad. "Well, until Ma decided no amount of *raising* was going to change me into a girl."

Lynnie chuckled darkly, "Valley varmints have small minds," they shook their head. "My Dad was convinced I was using 'They' pronouns because there was a demon in me."

"There *may* be a demon in you, yet," Ush muttered.

"Hey, we didn't bug your ship!" Sootfoot shouted back. "You did, when you brought that Colony-kisser aboard. Everything after that was just business."

"I've heard that one before," I said. "Just business, just following orders…"

"It'd be a disservice to the rebellion not to take advantage of the situation," Sootfoot replied. "You're being too emotional. Think of this objectively, from anyone else's perspective: The clean-cut Constable Antiope Adams skips town to climb into bed with a xeno…A headline like that would tear Colony morale apart. We had to seize our moment, brandish your image to make a point of Aries' hypocrisy–"

"And what about us?" I said. "The people you took advantage of?"

Soot shrugged. "Every maroon knows we all have to be prepared to make sacrifices for the greater good," they said. "Think of this as your sacrifice."

"A sacrifice is, by definition, something you agree to give up," Ush pointed out. "None of us were consulted about this. Did you ever think about what an invasion of our privacy that little stunt was? A violation of our safety! We could've been *killed*!"

"You guys seemed a lot more laidback in your recordings," Janelle said, Yilig chuckling.

"How'd you do it, anyhow?" Ant mustered. "Tap into my chip."

Lynnie nudged Janelle, "Well, we've got the finest hacker the Colonies ever made the mistake of hiring right here."

Janelle blushed. "It was no problem. After a few years breaking through Colony software, you get used to their encryption tricks. I could see the operations, but not interfere with them. The signal was so consistent, the visojecter would make it so all of you walked around us while we worked. Talked to us, as well, when you spoke amongst yourselves."

"Sounds convenient for *you*," I said. "How often did you watch us in bed, then?"

"*Jean*," Ant's voice was the only thing that could pierce through the rush of blood in my ears. "It's over, there's no going back, now. You need to let this go."

"WHY?" I spun to face her. There wasn't a sign of distress across her entire expression. "What about it being Crest outting us to the entire galactic government makes this excusable to you?"

"Because," Ant said, easily, smoothing her suit. "It means it wasn't Aries. This means, in a fucked up kind of way, we served the resistance. Our embarrassment has purpose."

"Slow down, Princess," Ush urged. "You're going to break your back with that kind of mental gymnastics."

Science Officer Lynnie chuckled, "Nice one," and held out their splayed hand for a high-five that Ush did not dispense.

"You're right, Ush," I said, but I looked at Ant as I did. *Glared* at her, even though I didn't want to. Because I was the Captain, and the well-being and direction of the crew was *my* responsibility. This was enough to overcome love, at least for now. "You're not doing a very good job of acting surprised at all this."

Ant relented under my heavy gaze, heaving a great sigh before admitting, "Because I came to terms with it all before the operation." She explained, "*Aystat Epticalskat*… Rat latin, she signalled to me in that last 'Whaletail' transmission."

Cold betrayal eked into my veins, ice creeping over my chest til the roar of questions overtook any hint of a heartbeat in my ears. "That was *three washes ago*." I kept my eyes fixed on Ant's, which were steady and as deep black as the cosmos. "You knew we were flying right into a trap. That–That Whaletail wasn't real–"

"That's *hilarious* by the way," Yilig piped up. His voice had taken on the excited, bubbly quality of a braggart. "I brushed up on a little sea-mammal, Octils have good vocal chords for the syllables. Janelle plugged the recordings into a learning algorithm and–bam–free Terrex intel."

"It wasn't that hard," Janelle blushed a deep violet, grinning a wide, gap-toothed grin that in any other context I would've found distractingly brillant. "We just tapped in, decrypted, and kicked back. Easy as one, two, three!"

"One, two, three," I echoed. Three washes. My girlfriend had harbored this secret from me for *three washes*. Had let me pilot my crew haplessly through space after a fantasy, an illusion. Had let me think we were so desperate as to confront Atticus R over change for fucking *fuel*. Fuel we had used to limp after a bargain with an advanced algorithm. "You've made a fool of me, Antiope. Worse, you put my entire crew in *life-threatening danger*."

"Jean–" Ant started, but her voice was strained, as if the barn were running low on oxygen. "This black hole situation is so much bigger than you or me, or Captain Crest, even."

Cad grunted, turning to Crest. "So you humiliated my Captain–and their girlfriend, for that matter–ignited the death of the entire Harmony crew, and lured us onto a deserted moon to achieve what exactly?" He rested a hand on his hammer, drew it half way. "Because, you should know if you've been watching us, we don't go down without a fight."

"Oh," Lynnie drew their white labcoat aside to draw a double-barreled pipe with a rudimentary iron handle out. "We're well aware."

"Put your trash away, Doc," Cad scoffed. "What *is* that, even? PVC plastic? That must be from some thousand-year-old landfill."

"It *is* from some thousand-year-old landfill," Lynnie shot back. "That's the thing about humans, we never consider what we throw away. Materials, humans, opportunities…"

"You know, Navigation Officer Sable," Ush said, flatly, "You sure do pick the best times to leave your weapon on the ship." They motioned to Lynnie. "Someone blast this idiot's mouth shut, already."

"I won't carry one of those things because I'm *not* a Constable," Ant said. "I won't act as an agent of the Colonies, because I'm *not*." She shot a look that could throw a planet off axis at Crest, armed, smug, and smirking. "Even if some people treat me like one."

"You went too far with that broadcast, Crest," I declared. Whatever future lay before Ant and I in the family department, now it was a given that there would be no visits from our extended relatives in it. Apollo wouldn't meet any Griever-runt we took in to raise. Not so much as an awkward Volternalia feast with the in-laws. Every possibility for peace between those tenuous worlds blinking out of existence like a cepheid star running low on fuel, all in the speed of a broadcast. The speed of an orgasm.

"The ends justify the means," Crest said, easily. Reasons at the ready. "Dignity doesn't factor into revolutions, Starshine. There's something they won't teach you at Colony College."

"Captain?" said Usher, looking to me.

"Kill them," I said.

The Medusa crew had come with their trash-heap hotshots, all right, but the spymaster's ilk hadn't seen action in octavers. Rusty didn't even begin to describe them. Sootfoot was strong, with great reflexes, sure, but just a surge of the savagery I hadn't tapped into since the Harmony brawl overwhelmed them. Me launching myself at their jugular, both of us falling to the steel plating to grapple as I snapped at their throat.

Cad overwhelmed Yigil with just three arcs of the clawed end of the hammer, two tentacles tearing from the Octil's face in a wash of green blood. While Ush and Janelle struggled, the First Mate wrenching Ush's labcoat over her head.

Lynnie slammed the blunt side of their crapshot into the back of my head.

I twisted to sink my sabers into their forearm.

Red blood, hot and pulsing around my fangs. As much as I'd ever had in my mouth. Ramming had a cathartic action to it, but the taste of the blood was more satisfying than I would ever admit out loud.

Lynnie cried out, beat my head desperately as they wriggled, arm locked in my jaws.

Janelle staggered backward at the sight. "Lyn–Let them *go*!" She picked up a shovel, waved it over her head.

A small, hot, red cannon ate through the center of the silver shovel end. "That's about enough," Captain Crest's crapshot smoked as she readied to fire again, leveling it at me. "I'll take it from here."

My helmet activated as a streak of white moonlight cut across the barn floor. Widening to allow several thorny black snakes–as black as the vines sprouting over the moon and as long as I was tall–to slither inside the barn.

In the opened doorway, a lanky Kaleidizen with violet scales leaned. They were young, even moreso than us, shroud in a black spacesuit. With a shorter snout than I'd ever seen on a Kaleidizen, and only two nostrils instead of the usual three. "Mom says if you've got time to shoot bullets, you've got time to ring the dinner bell."

"Brook, next time *please* leave the adults alone to kill each other," Crest holstered her crapshot. "We're all just cranky because it's past time we put something in our stomachs. What

do you think, Kylix crew?" Crest held out her hand, and Brook handed a canvas-wrapped bundle of something round and giving off a scent like a warm sun-glazed breeze. Bread. A loaf of *real* bread. "Smells better than nutrisoup and cereal, eh?" Crest motioned, and her crew brushed themselves off. Yigil collecting their tentacles to eat, thus sprouting replacements. "I know we didn't make a *great* first impression, but we didn't do anything we did lightly. Your sacrifices, your pain, is real. I summoned you here because we need each other, we each have something the other wants."

"As if," Ush sneered, righting her labcoat.

"We need allies against the Colonies," Captain Crest said. "You need a home, a place to dock, to *stay*."

"With *you*?" I cut in. "We'll take our chances in the Suburbia Belt."

"That's your decision, Captain Sable," Crest said, handing the loaf of bread to me. "You're welcome to join us in the mess hall for oats-and-veggies stew. Much heartier than the stuff they peddle to Grievers. Everything that grows here is heartier than much of anything you'll find in Inner Space. We'll chat, make merry, get warm. Then, you could couple your ship to one of our docklodges. I think you'll find the extra room to your liking."

Lynnie tended to their wounds as Janelle wrapped a rag around their blood-slicked, punctured arm. In formation, the Medusa crew filed out of the barn, leaving us with the bread, our hunger, and a decision to make.

The Medusa Moon Mess Hall was a slender silver building at the center of town. A tall belltower welded to the top, operated by the yanking of several fortified wires. Inside, the kitchen was in the center of the hall, as the Hall was. Pots steaming over blue fires with cometcow wool as

tinder. Dozens of villagers–no more than fifty–lined up for a bowl of stew, and a tall glass of water. Though, tonight, more than a few opted for a can of Kylix Kölsch.

Including a hazel-eyed Griever who sat across from us as she popped the tab of the can. "I'm Verena," she said, risking a sip. "*BLEUGH!* And this is one…*creative* brew."

"I'll take that as a compliment," I said, looking past her at a table two elderly men leaned over, concentrating on the small, bronze balls in the center of it. One angled a metal staff I mistook as his cane at one heavy ball, and gave it a decisive shove. It landed with a metal thud in the pocket diagonal from him, sunken into the table. "Has this moon always had such a small population?"

"Not at first," a woman I'd hardly noticed piped up. She was practically shrunken in her seat–curled inward and downward–seated several people across from Verena across from us. Her eyes were magnified times five through goggles with a prescription that rivaled even mine. Wrinkles etched so deeply into the ravines around her mouth and eyes one could practically read words into her face. One word in particular: *OLD*.

Elderly, even. So old that, even though she was seated, I wanted to offer her my seat, anyway. So old, I felt the urge to grab her spoon and feed her despite her trembling hand managing to do so on its own.

"Assata," she inclined her head toward me.

"Jean," I said. "*Captain* Jean."

"*Chairman* Assata," said Assata. "If you must know, child."

"Chairman?" Ush butted in, next to me, speaking around a mouthful of food. "Of what association?"

Assata straightened her back, and grinned, revealing two rows of uneven teeth that were too spaced out. As if every other tooth had been pulled–or punched–out. “Well, you’ve heard of the gold dogs?” We nodded. “We called ourselves the Red Wolves.” When her dark, cloudy eyes flicked up to meet mine, they seemed to belong to someone eighty years younger. “The Exodus Act wasn’t something America pulled out of its ass, it was brewing from the moment the first rich person felt thirst. We knew what was coming, and we knew the Earth was at stake.”

“Earth?” It’d been so long since I’d said the word aloud, it felt foreign on my tongue. An alien language. I sized up the woman, Assata. She was dark-skinned, just a shade or two lighter than me, barely noticeable to anyone who wasn’t comparing us. If she’d had rabbit ears or fangs, she could easily be a retired xenogene. Colony trash, outgrown our position and down a few organs after lending them graciously to our ailing, elderly Captain. A white person. “You’re a Terran?”

Assata sputtered out a croak of laughter. “I’m an *Earthling*. A *citizen*, we used to call ourselves, before America ate everyone else.”

“But you’re…”

“Black,” Ush supplied.

“Well, yes,” Assata shrugged. “There used to be Black people on Earth. More Black and Brown people than White, actually. But we were poor, and we didn’t own land. We could barely afford to rent it. That’s how we were so easily uprooted.” She chuckled. If she were an engine, puffs of dust and smoke would have ejected from her nostrils. “We *did* put up a fight, though. The fight of our lives.”

“Hold on,” I cut in. “So you’re telling me you survived the Exodus Act?”

"That, and a lot more," Assata nodded. "The Hera was a death-trap, but the Great Griever only flirted with some of us. Those of us who were ready to go, it seemed." Assata tugged at the zipper on her scarlet spacesuit. Eased it down to her jugular, revealing a silver string that she pulled on.

On the end of the string, a rusted key. Notched, twisted with age. So much so, I was sure it would struggle to open whatever door it had originally been made to open.

"It was a small place back in California–uh, that was a state in America," Assata gazed at the key. Gave a small smile, her eyes welling. "We didn't own it, no, but we *lived* there. It was our home for ten long years. First, they took Freddie. Then, they took the house. Then, they took the planet." Assata tucked the key away.

"But you kept the key," I said.

Assata nodded, and there were no tears in her eyes, then. "I did," she said. "Medusa is a beautiful moon, and I owe so much to this settlement. But I was born on Earth, and I'll die on Earth–or, at least, be buried there."

"I understand," I said. "What I don't get is why you've all bothered with Medusa, anyway. Why settle for the moon when the planet is right there?"

Now, this was a line of questioning Assata seemed adept at fielding. She explained how the moon was, at first, meant to house the run-off residents from the main planet Morrow. Morrow having very little habitable land, but an atmosphere that had been painstakingly oxygenated over the course of three decades. The most vulnerable were then moved there, which just so happened to be most everyone residing at the edge of the galaxy. Advanced Cyano patients. Children who's parents hadn't had access to the geopox vaccine, their spotted skin sloughing off of their bones if the temperature of the room they were in wasn't kept consistently

cold enough. Their families, as well as a meeting hall, school, and public library also populated the planet.

Enough of the Medusan Grievers were children that a daily pod to the main planet was arranged to pick up a class' worth of them for transport. Including Verena's half-Kaleid child.

Verena said, "I knew Brook wouldn't be safe in Inner Space. Even full Kaleidizens need high-rank certification to avoid raids, eviction. We found Medusa five yushes ago, but it hasn't always been easy. Before Liv and Lynnie turned the soil, food was hard to come by. Now…" She gestured to the tin pots, plates, and pans arranged on the long metal table before us. Just one of three such displays.

"Did Crest tell you to say that exactly, or just something like it?" I asked, stuffing my face with fresh, steaming breadrolls.

Verena laughed at this, spraying crumbs and almost choking so her son had to clap her on the back. "Something like it," she admitted.

Ush nodded at the children's table to our side, at the other end of the Mess Hall. "How old is the youngest pregnant one?" I hadn't noticed til she pointed it out, but several of the older kids, none over fourteen, were bloated with pregnancy. Not just one or two, either.

"Thirteen," Verena said solemnly. "It's…uh…Well, I don't have to tell any of you the way it is in some Griever communities. Growing up, they wouldn't so much as tell you where your butthole is, if you didn't shit from it."

Sootfoot, the xeno Pilot of the Medusa, sat next to Verena, across from us and Brook. "The ones that buy into all that Adamist stuff," they said. "*Vincere Sortem Nostram*. Constant growth, a supply of workers raised where education about that kind of stuff is practically considered propaganda."

"They need treatment," said Verena. "A *doctor*."

"We get it," said Ush. "Crest wants us to stay." She tried to sound annoyed, but only managed a hollow tone.

At the head of our table, Crest was locked in boisterous, animated conversation with Antiope. "--*offload the real work to Grievers, and the money for all those weapons, too. The average Terrex dweller pays more in taxes than any of the Five Families*."

Throughout each table, chatter amidst the children and adults alike was abuzz around the topic of secession. Maroon talk.

At the middle of the table, a low cauldron of vegetable soup boiled up the scent of a thousand spices. As I ladled myself a bowlful of soup, I was reminded of the Hot Cauldron Command aboard the Undergal. According to some laws, if I ate this soup, me and the golden turncoat would become one and the same.

"I don't get it," I said. "I know Crest is a leaker, but what made everyone else so eager to jump ship? Colony life might be kind of dull, but it's comfortable."

"You *sure* you don't get it?" Brook snickered.

"Brook, it's no one's business but their own," Verena chided, though she did chuckle.

I looked between each member of the Medusa crew. Janelle passing Yilig a knife that they wielded in their tentacles. Halving a new loaf into slices that each of their crewmates took, tickling their tentacles, and kissing their cheek. Captain Liv Crest took a big bite of the bread, swallowed, and traded the taste with Lynnie–who's arm was thickly bandaged. "Oooh," I said aloud, despite myself.

That put everything into perspective, all right. The Colonies weren't fond of any arrangement that didn't appeal to Adamist principles. Two people, specifically a man and a

woman, was considered the ideal partnership. A five-person bond just wasn't conducive to the Colony agenda of alienation.

"They've been kissing each other all night," Ush rolled her eyes. "Jean, you seriously didn't get it until now?"

"No," I said.

"The Status Quo is the most powerful glasses prescription," Sootfoot said. "All-Crew Intimacy isn't as rare as you think. It's thought that three out of ten crews experiment with it, at least once."

"We'd be a part of the abstaining seven," Ush clarified.

"But we don't judge," I said. "I mean, you've seen our demographics."

"Grievers," said Soot. "But you managed to bag a Colony noble?"

"I didn't 'bag' Ant," I said. "We fell in love."

"Then you've got more in common with us than you think," said Soot, standing to join their crew as they took turns feeding each other.

"Wow," I said, just imagining the logistics. If anyone got into a lover's quarrel, the entire crew would have no choice but to be affected. The exact thing we tried to keep a lid on aboard the Kylix. "Can you imagine what the crew meetings are like?"

"I would prefer not to," Ush said. "Especially considering there's *children present*."

Brook scoffed at this, swallowing a mouthful of bread incorrectly a moment before Verena clapped them on the back. "I'll have you know that legally, given the Outter Galactic Commission's employment ordinance, I count as an adult."

"Adults don't get on a school-pod every wash of the septur to study Basics," Ush said.

"Basic Lessons stop at age seventeen in the Outer-Gal, thank the Great Griever," Brook muttered this last part.

Verena flicked soup into Brook's face. "You're never going to get into Colony College if you don't do your reading, young man."

Cad sat alert at the same time as Pool and I. I figured they both must be as scandalized as was at the woman wasting the precious soup: The bread was crisp and filling, yes, but the *soup* was unlike anything I'd ever had in my mouth. Hot, yes, and thoroughly spiced. With chunks of carrots and potatoes marinated in the blend of tomato, dill, and basil base. The vegetables had an otherworldly give when you bit into them, and the *flavor*.

Come to think of it, I wasn't sure if I could call what cereal and nutriSoup tasted like *flavor*, anymore.

Brook snorted, swiping a napkin across his face. "I'll never get in anyway, I don't have a UC ID." The young Kaleidizen wiggled his fingers at me, and made ghoulish noises. "I'm a ghost as far as the Colonies are concerned. Born and raised on Medusa."

"Young man?" Cad said around a mouthful of mashed carrots. He peered across the table at the two Medusans. "Sorry, I thought all Kaleidizens were gender-neutral."

"We *are*," Pool thudded their fist on the black metal table like a gavel. "To a Kaleidizen, to gender is to burder, to restrain…"

"Brook isn't exactly a Kaleidizen," said Verena. "Their other parent was a vyjynkaleidizen–They, uh–"

"Got into it with some Constable in the Aries Quadrant," Brook finished. "We never saw them again, the whole situation was buried."

"That's, well…" Pool's nostrils flared, their fist trembling on the table. Scales chittering against the metal. "That's fucked up, and I'm sorry to hear that, but there's two things wrong with this picture, and they both go against what our culture stands for."

"Stand down, cranky-scales," Brook said.

"No one but a human would let their parents pick their name and gender out for them!" Pool shot back, shoving to their feet. We weren't getting many glances, and the room mess hall still buzzed with chatter, but a deadly serious chill had fallen over our section of the long table we sat at.

"No one but a Dick-idizen would care," Brook didn't even both to stop eating. Speaking around his food as Cad had. "Not everyone wants to spring out of the egg and have an existential crisis. It's people like you that turn babies out into the stars to choke on moonrocks, how's that for perfect parenting?"

"So you *did* come out of an egg?" Cad stroked his stubbly chin.

"Don't talk to me about parenting, *Wuzu Kuliwelar*!" Pool thundered. "Least of all in the Colonizer's language!"

It took me a moment to place where these words echoed from. Then, it came back to me. This was the exact phrasing the jyn-Kaleid, River, had lashed at Pool two septurs ago.

"The Colonizer?" Ush's voice was ladden with sarcasm, but there was no humor in Pool's blazing six eyes.

"DON'T SPEAK TO ME, LUGOMIR!" The Translations Officer roared. Their spikes were trembling in tune with their ragged breaths. Gills flexing as if to sample the tensing atmosphere. "DON'T *EVER* SPEAK TO ME!"

"Pool," Cad's voice was even and almost annoyingly calm. "Forget about all that, it's over–"

"It's not over for the millions of people she infected!" Pool stabbed a scaled finger at Ush, across Cad and I. "And it's not over for the hundreds of Kaleidizens dragoons are slaughtering on the clock!" Now, I understood what half fueled this fury. Of course, what happened on the Harmony wouldn't be leaving my mind or dreams any time soon. "Our culture is already dying, the last thing we need are self-righteous humans taking our lives, then raising our hatchlings with the same arrogance."

Brook patted his stomach as he stretched back, away from the table. "Somebody's going through Dick-idizen puberty," he muttered. "I always heard quarter-Kaleids were moody."

"This'll be you one wash!" Pool snapped at him.

"Trust me," Brook said. "I'll never be like you."

"He's right," Ush said with the detached ease of a researcher. "There haven't been enough studies to verify if half-Kaleids experience such mating cycles."

Pool did something, then, that I'd never seen them, do. Lunging across the table at Usher with their jaw wide and their four rows of fangs flared for shredding. A pool of venom sloshing over their lips to slather the table in thick green droplets.

Cadbury threw himself over the table. Taking Pool by the shoulders as the Translations Officer bit into his shoulder instead of Ush's jugular.

Tears welled in Cad's eyes as the puncture wounds smoked. I'd never seen venom get into a wound. Just regular skin contact was a ticket to dreamland, but Cad wasn't dreaming. Instead, his legs wobbled beneath him, giving as he knelt on the table. Coughing.

"NO!" Pool shook Cad by the shoulders, fingers trembling over his suit zipper. "What is it? Can you breathe?"

"It's his immune system," Ush busied herself inspecting his throat. "It can't fight the venom *and* the Cyano at the same time."

"What does that mean?" Pool asked.

Usher didn't answer for several moments. She'd slipped into Doctor Lugomir mode. Using two fingers to time Cad's pace, clasping his wrist. "I don't know," Ush admitted, smacking Cadbury's face as his eyelids fluttered open. "Nelson, can you hear me? Can we open your suit?"

Cad gave a barely perceptible nod. "*I sure…paid enough…*" The First Mate took in a rasping suck of air. "*To get my tits off…*"

Ush nodded, slipping a hand into the inside pocket stitched into her black lab coat, and pulling out a handful of items: A vial of thick green liquid, a packaged–presumedly sterile–needle, and an empty, unused medical plunger that she attached the syringe to. "Is it okay for Pool to?" The Doctor donned gloves that she pulled from the same pocket. "I need to make the injection site sterile. Does anyone have any liquor, I forgot the alcohol wipes in the Kylix."

Cad nodded again, his face purpling, and heat seeming to radiate off of him in great waves. "*You kidding….? ….That would be a…*"

Now, I slapped the First Mate. "SHUT UP! Great Griever, man, you don't want your last words to be a joke."

Cad didn't heed me. "*...Dream…*" His black eyes flashed gold, and venom surged out in the place of tears. Leaking across the First Mate's face like thin trails of green, boiling lava.

Brook fumbled with his mother's soup a moment, then grasped her half-empty can of Kylix Kolsch: Onion Edition. He emptied it, washing Cad's eyes clear and eliciting a heaving–but, thankfully, loud–gasp out of the semiconscous Griever.

Steam rose from Cad's cheeks as Pool eased his zipper down. Unveiling his bound chest. "Now what?" said Pool.

Ush leaned over Cad as she secured the needle, using the syringe to pierce the top of the sealed vial of ooze. Usher drew back on the plunger, sucking the liquid up into the syringe, and readying her arm over Cad's chest. "This!"

Pool caught her arm, growling, more venom leaking even as they spoke. "What the hell are you doing?"

"It's antivenom," Ush wrenched herself free. "Um, remember when we first met. You let me sedate you so I could remove all that infected skin from your wound…"

Pool recoiled. "You *milked* my venom glands *while I was asleep*?"

"One, you were *drooling*, so the harvesting process wasn't quite so, er, invasive," Ush said. "Two, it was before I knew to trust you. Colony propaganda starts in gradeschool." They urged Pool aside, and we all stepped backward to allow the Doctor more space as she plunged the syringe into Nelson's chest.

No, not just his chest. His *heart*.

We were, all at once, thankful to have made room.

Nelson leapt to his feet as soon as Usher emptied the shot. Drawing back her arm at the same time that venom poured of his nostrils. Thick and deep green, at first, then thinning to mealy, translucent sludge. Color reappearing as deep red tendrils crawled through Cad's snot.

He hyperventilated as he swiped at his face. Coughing into the crook of his arm. Patting his pockets wildly, though it was Pool who provided an inhaler.

Nelson emptied the CyanAway canister in an instant. Taking great gulps of the spray. His chest rising and falling so rapidly I thought his ribs might snap. This wasn't why I hugged him, though.

"Cad," I cried. "Nelson, you're okay!"

"It burns, Captain," Cad moaned. He scratched desperately at his throat as the inhaler ran dry. As if trying to open a new mouth. "I can breathe, for now, but *it burns*!"

"Burns a lot more in hell," Ush said, extending a hand for him to grasp. "You didn't have to do that, Nelson."

"I was abandoned at fourteen, remember?" Cad took Ush's hand. "I haven't *had* to do anything or listen to anyone since my parents left." For a while, the three of us just held onto each other. "I *choose* to."

Cad extended his other hand to Pool, but the Translations Officer shook their head. Two eyes fixed on Cad's, four others on his still-steaming shoulder. The suit mending around the wound, but allowing the smoke to rise through the threads. "I can't," they said.

"I *want* you to," said Nelson.

Pool's spikes trembled. All of them did, collapsing outward like an exploding mosaic of painted glass. This phenomena, I realized thinking back to Brook's comments about quarter-Kaleids, was their new form. And, I hadn't realized until now how hard Pool was fighting to keep it in. "Nelson, I know you think you know what you're getting into, but you don't."

"Pool?"

"Only a Kaleidizen would."

"*POOL!*"

"Captain," Pool said evenly, nodding at me. "The keys."

They seemed to grow heavier in my pocket. "I don't think so," I said. "Pool, we've been through worse than this."

"No," Pool shook their head just once, decisively. When they spoke, it was the voice of someone piloting their own ship. Someone with a destination in mind. "Don't talk as if the last septurs have been the same for all of us. Our own crewmates–*your own mate*–have lied and gambled with our lives just to lead us to the doorstep of a retired professional genocider."

"Pool, as your *Captain*, I can not in good conscience let you strand us with that same genocider."

"I knew you wouldn't let me," said Pool. They raised their gauntlet, and flipped the switch in the control panel. The splayed steel fingers curled into a gleaming fist. "That's why I wasn't asking."

The Translations Officer launched themself at me with such intensity, the nearest two tables flung backward. Plates and people rained against the metal-plated floor. A cacophony of clangs and groans that Pool danced through to deliver the first blow.

Square in the horn, with all their weight behind that iron arm.

Pain stabbed through my forehead, trickling down acrid and sour into my gullet. Settling in my chest where it exploded as pure fire.

I doubled over, and Pool plucked the black metal keys from my pocket as easily as if they'd found them on the floor.

"I'm sorry," they said. "But nothing's adding up, and if her Highness can dredge up Crest, I can dredge up some sense."

"*JEAN*?" Ant tore across the floor as Pool slipped out of the messhall. She cradled my throbbing horn. Each thrum of pain accompanying a flash of bright white.

The flashes came closer, whipping up into a tornado of agony. The migraine only faded as my vision did.

The crew was *not* wearing their spacesuits. This was the first thing I noted when my brain had shed the groggy tiredness that always accompanied waking. But they weren't wearing Earth clothes, either.

Landwear was weird like that. Only the Colonies had access to real cloth, the soft, comfortable stuff, canvas and leather was the closest any other settlement could muster. And, indeed, boxy black canvas shirts were thrown over Cad, Ush, and Antiope's bodies. Their pants were drawstring and loose, but not ill-fitting, canvas, as well. More like–what was the word?

"Pajamas," I uttered, sitting up as pain slashed through my skull. "AUGH! Where's–What about–?"

Oh, right.

Cad confirmed, as the memories leaked back into me. "Pool's gone," he said. "The Kylix, too."

"I'm not surprised," said Ush.

"Then you should've warned a guy," I tried to sit up, again. This time, Antiope slipped an arm around me. Lifted me a bit to adjust where I was on the–This wasn't my module. I was in some kind of small metal room. Cramped, due to the crew, crowded around the tiny, but soft, bed.

The only seat was a leather chair that Sootfoot lounged in. Splaying their padded toes against the shaggy, carpeted floor, and looking into the corner. I figured, to give me and the crew a bit of privacy.

“The docklodge,” Ant explained, as if reading my mind. She gently stroked my tail. “It’s a five-bedroom.”

“Must be a coincidence,” I snatched my tail out of her grasp.

Antiope’s eyes were watery, big, and as black as always. “It’s been *hours*, Jean! A day, even. I wouldn’t know, because I never left you alone.”

“I wish you *had*!” A snarl lashed across the tiny space between us, and Ant shifted off of the bed. Standing and righting her shirt. “I barely even recognize you without the gold get-up. You’re as manipulative as any Constable!” I threw the thick canvas sheets aside to stand on the bed and rage at Ant properly. Rising to my full height, and then some. Towering over her to rain down hate and spittle as I spat. “Why don’t you go run back to Crest, already! Since she’s more important than keeping our crew together! Keeping everyone in the know!”

Ant turned her shoulder to me. Strode across the room to a tiny metal table with a steaming bowl on top of it. She picked it up, and carried it to me.

The smell was enough for me to identify the contents, tomato soup. Just the scent was enough to make my stomach growl and pang with wash-old hunger.

Ant extended the bowl to me, cupped in her hands. “I know you’re hungry, so I kept this warm for you.”

Ush retreated behind Cadbury as if she’d encountered this type of eruption before. A boil enflamed and in the most uncomfortable–most unforgivable–spot, just about ready to burst and spew forth something that smelled foul.

Nelson took a different approach. “Jean, we’re all just stressed. You need to calm down.”

“DON’T TELL ME TO CALM DOWN, CAD!” I roared, rearing back my leg to kick the bowl out of Antiope’s hands.

Creamy orange soup splashed across the cream-colored carpet, whipping across Cadbury, Ant, and Sootfoot in oozing orange stripes. “AND DON’T PRESUME TO KNOW WHAT I WANT!”

Nelson sighed, shaking his head. “Not cool, Captain.”

Ush turned to Antiope. “It was a mistake, I think, to let them wake up with you in the room. Could you give us some space, Princess?”

Ant did a bad job of hiding how hurt she was over the request. “Whatever you need, Jean,” she said. “Me and Crest are taking the errandPod to a local pebbleBelt, harvesting some heating supplies. We won’t be long, okay? Maybe when I get back, we can talk?”

I ignored her, sitting on the bed and turning to face the empty, steely wall to my side. I didn’t turn back until the sound of her footsteps had receded.

Cad shook his head. “We’re divided enough, Jean,” he said, his eyes wandering to the window across from my bed. The same way Pool’s had toward their own home, the Caniscen.

There was no doubt that’s where the Translations Officer had gone.

“You only ever complained about her, anyway,” I pointed out, struggling to throw my legs over the side of the bed.

I was still wearing my suit, and was glad of it. Surrounded by the shadowy clothing of the Medusans, and the ghostly white linen, steely silver walls, the warm lavender of my Griever’s suit was as comforting as fireheat.

"Sure," Cad gave his easy, signature shrug. "She's as shady and questionable as any branch of the government, but you also orbit her, Jean. It was *you* who told *me* love needs room to breathe. Take that for yourself, but don't throw away the connection you two share."

"That's just romantic cowshit," Ush cut in. "Cut her off, if you need to, Captain. Just be sure you *need* to."

"Noted, Doctor," I said. "Quick thinking back in the mess hall…Um, what happened after I…?"

"Blacked out?" Ush supplied. "Adams administered a few cold compresses with the cloth napkins and ice on the table, um, though most of it was on the floor by then…"

My head panged as Pool's furious face flashed across my vision. "Right," I said.

"I carried you back to the docklodge," Cad explained. "Crest already had it warmed up and ready for us." He shook his head, again. "Almost like she's ten steps ahead…"

I grunted, "More like ten thousand."

"No," Sootfoot piped up, in the corner of the room. "Just ten hundred."

Right. There was that misshappen puzzle piece. Sootfoot stretched, yawning and giving a bright chirp as they popped their neck and knuckles.

"Shouldn't you be off to join your Captain?" I asked, my tone hitched and obnoxious even on my own ears.

"We're having a bit of a tiff, actually," Sootfoot's pupils slid sideways across their eyes into crescent moons amidst their gray iris. Taking in a change of light, I remembered. That, or changing mental states. Liar, or truthful. Feral, or tamed. Pilot, or Xeno. "She's asked me not to come with her, and I wouldn't want to, anyway."

Cadbury helped me to my feet, steadying me with an arm around the shoulders. Tugging one of my pantlegs down from where it had rided up on my knee. “We’re not in the business of giving relationship advice,” he said.

Sootfoot chuckled darkly. “As if I’d want any from *you*, of all people. We’ve listened to your files, remember? Wouldn’t have to, even, considering the glittering guilt-bag is nowhere to be seen.”

Cad went for his hammer, but his toolbelt wasn’t around his waist, for once. “You watch your mouth, FuzzFeet!”

“It’s *SootFoot*!”

“It’s *private* information!” Nelson asserted.

SootFoot backed off, ambling to the end of the bed and picking up a single, long, stiff strand of my tail fur that clung to the sheets. “We’ve got a way of getting around that type of thing, here. Janelle’s good, yeah, but she’s just reconnaissance, stealth. Risk, endurance, *drive*– That’s where a Xeno comes in.”

I crossed the room to a metal dresser. A sweating, silver cup of water rested there, no doubt prepared by Ant.

This, I didn’t have it in me to deny. I picked it up, and slammed down the freezing cold contents in just two throbbing gulps. “I’m not your hacker, or your Octil lover,” I said. “I don’t speak in code.”

SootFoot looked between Ush and Cadbury. The whiskers around their nose trembling as they sampled the scent of my crewmate’s sweat. “I was thinking we’d talk in private.”

“You should know better than to make assumptions about us Kylixers,” I rubbed my aching horn. “I’m figuring that out, myself.”

SootFoot hesitated a moment, but sighed long and deep. “It all started with the U-Fi connection,” they said.

Janelle was used to rotating the Undernet signal based on how closely a neighboring ship was idling. That’s how the Medusa crew first encountered the seemingly sourceless connection. ‘ObservationZ’ A Terrex-owned laboratory, except that it wasn’t visible.

“The entire lab is cloaked,” SootFoot explained.

“So what?” Cad shrugged. “Secrecy isn’t exactly new when it comes to the Colonies.”

“We thought so, too,” said SootFoot. “Then Janelle tapped into the cameras. They’re all cross-wired, encrypted feeds, but there’s some kind of video streaming out of the facility. Dozens of videos, actually, and all at the same time. To some kind of central monitor, but also *through* it. Across the Undernet, and a powerful signal. The Colonies might *take in* information, but they don’t typically *give it out*.”

“At least,” Ush chimed in. “Not without a profit incentive.”

SootFoot nodded, just once. “Exactly,” they said. “Nelle triangulized the location, and was even able to access a guest list.”

“I thought it was a lab,” Ush said. “Only scientists would want to be holed up inside, anyway.”

“Except not a single scientist was listed,” SootFoot went on. “The guest list–this digital black book of celebrities, politicians, actors, musicians, you name it–was encrypted, but barely. Almost like it wasn’t meant to withstand much tampering.”

“Probably on standby for blackmail material,” Ush said.

“Maybe,” SootFoot stroked their whiskers in time with Cadbury. “Yilig figured it must be investors, but I think they’re customers.”

The metal cup trembled in my grasp. I was glad it was empty. “Customers,” I repeated.

I knew well enough what a name like Observation Z might entail. XG-Z subjects were separated from the rest of the Xenos the fifteenth yush of every production cycle. Our instructors always told us this was for study purposes, to help scientists isolate what they wanted in the next round of production.

But it hadn’t occurred to me until now that I’d never met an adult XG-Z.

Everyone was set loose at some point. I escaped Scout School, but when a Xeno graduated, took their placement with an Envoy, that was the end of Colony restriction. As long as one didn’t mingle too intimately with humans, Xenos were charged with the helm of most active ships. Arguably–especially in terms of tolerable cruelty–we had the most freedom of any Colony employee. Of course, there were Terran Captains to pass down commands, but, ultimately, the decision to steer a cosmocraft safely, not surpassing the G-Forces humans were so sensitive to, was up to the pilot.

If As through Ys became pilots, what did Zs become?

“What’s the catch?” I said.

“Mission Designation,” said Sootfoot. “Not Advisable. Captain Crest has *forbid* any member of the crew from pursuing this lead. She’s worried if so many lawmakers are moving in and out with no issue, the lab must be attached to some high level facility. High *security*. Any opportunities have been weighed against the risks, and she’s ordered us all to stand down and let the vessel drift away. It’s already had a fish wash head-start...”

“Opportunities?” I said.

“Risks?” Nelson and Ush said at the same time.

SootFoot explained, “A craft with twenty-plus cameras must have twenty-plus modules. With a guest list so long, there *has* be a docking bay present, and a big one. Every name in the book has a blue link on Underpedia. Captain Darrell Starling, owner of Starling Engineering. Judge Morgan Mince, current chair on the Terrex Supreme Court. If their ships are unattended, and I’d bet they are–considering the ship is already cloaked–we’d make off with so much ammo, IDs, and information we wouldn’t have to go raiding for years. That isn’t even to mention the support maroons would gain if we expose whatever they’re hiding. Support means *numbers*.”

My heartbeat slowed to a deliberate and maddening beat. War drums. “That’s what this is really about to you,” I said. “Your cause, your image, your war with Terrex. What sense does it make springing someone from the Colonies control just to tether them to another movement?”

“Look around, Jean,” said SootFoot. They crossed to the window, hiked up the blinds, and threw back the curtain. A parent cometcow licked the flaming head of their calf, yards away. Both relaxing in the shade of knottree.

The unevenly spaced dock-lodges were lit up and bustling with life. Humans in helmets lounging across their porches as children chased snakes away from a colony of cowering locustrats.

“We don’t have many warriors,” said SootFoot. “We can’t put a toddler behind the wheel of a commandeered craft, and I’m afraid the cows are poor learners when it comes to defensive tactics. Maroons–*redsuits*–are scattered, isolated, argumentative amongst their factions regarding their specific ideals and beliefs. What’s the one thing that Xenos have in common?”

Now, I understood. “We’re built to kill.” In Scout School, our aggression was fostered, stoked, our piloting skills honed and consistently reinforced, but our claws, fangs, and horns

came naturally. One wouldn't have to train a Xeno recruit much. Just aim them at an enemy. That, and give them a reason to fight for you. "You have the location?"

"Roughly, yes," said SootFoot. "They're moving fast, looks like they don't stay in one place for long. Even in the Periphereals. There's a short window to catch up, and that's only if we push the Great Snake to its limits."

"We," I repeated. *We, we, we*. The word echoing in time with my panging horn. Because, whatever SootFoot had intended approaching *me,* Ush and Cad were now watching my expression with both apprehension and terrifying readiness. At my word, again, my crew would be flying into something risky, unpredictable, and completely universe changing if we succeeded.

This last point, I knew, SootFoot had anticipated me considering.

Other than SootFoot and myself, I'd never encountered a defected Xenogene. Even if it was for a maroon cause, so many free Xenos would be historic. With enough of us acting independent of Colony command, the image of a Xeno as Terrex property would become outdated.

No more Captains locking their crafts when I rolled through the docking corridor, no more Terrans touching my horns. No more Xenomy laws.

"Captain?" Nelson said, waking me from my washdream.

"It's a gamble," I admitted.

"I must be contagious," Ush smirked. "I think we've *all* developed an addiction to that."

Sootfoot's pupils widened, black swallowing up the brilliant, thunderous gray like an abyss bomb going off in the middle of their eyes. "What do you say, Jean? When the Captain's away…"

This, I recalled as a phrase XG-L had used, back when they'd brought me the shadefruit. Back when they'd kissed me. It hadn't occurred to me until now that the only life I could vividly recall taking, their blood running down my face, my horns stained and stinking of iron for washes, was another xenogene's. "The xenogenes play."

The Great Snake cut through the cosmos as easily as a giant bullet. Cadbury commenting on so many of the features embedded in the control panel that I had to swallow back pure jealousy.

The Kylix was a midsonic freighter meant for the most fuel efficient travel, not the fastest. Freight staff was paid well for the octavers spent in sluggish travel, for the headache of listening to that consistent, puttering engine. A persistence mission.

The Galiton drive was an ultrasonic engine, capable of moving at twenty-five times the speed of sound. But because of the Kylix's design, there was no way to throw it into high gear without the ship's outer layers peeling off, throwing all of us into the vacuum of space.

The Great Snake, however–the Medusa crews polished green cosmocraft–was a hypersonic vehicle, with a hypersonic engine. Capable of travelling at ten times the speed of sound, which it was also capable of enduring.

SootFoot was a fine pilot, but I couldn't help looking over their shoulder. Noticing that they didn't activate their glareshield until it was immediately needed, when we glided too closely to a pulsing orange star. That, in their Left Inboard Module, the Terrain Awareness flare was blinking orange, slowly.

"Your T.A. is down," I said, giving away my judgement.

SootFoot shrugged. "Is it important?"

My head was suddenly aching, again. “And you’ve been behind the wheel for *how long exactly?*”

SootFoot scoffed. “I’m two yushes older than you!”

“I’m just saying,” I strode to the T.A. button, and pressed it hard.

The intercom crooned, “*Terrain Awareness System online. Warnings online.*”

“You can’t always tell when you’re landing on solid ground,” I explained.

SootFoot groaned, rolling their eyes into the next universe. They looked between Ush and Cad, strapped into the seats around the control panel. “Are they always this serious?”

“Only when it comes to flying,” Nelson admitted.

“That,” said Ush, “and their girlfriend.”

“Don’t!” I barked, giving everyone except SootFoot a jolt. Ush drawing in her arms as if I’d snapped at her with my teeth instead of my words. “Sorry, I just–Don’t talk about *her* around me.” I drew in a cool breath–the air was circulating fresh and icy through the command cabin–but the air heated as it surged into my lungs. And, when I exhaled, I might as well have been breathing fire. “The only thing I want any of you to focus on is the task at hand.”

Cad nodded once. “Yes, Captain.”

Ush said, “Let’s go over this plan one more time, then.”

So we did, and more than once.

The vessel emitting the U-Fi connection known as Operation Z was cloaked, and there weren’t any pictures or diagrams uploaded on the undernet, so all we had to rely on to get an estimate for size was Janelle’s radar approximation. Bouncing sounds off of the structure from Medusa in order to get a sense of the distance and design of the ship.

That's how we knew to hover in the middle of some kind of main room, smack in-between the long and hollow wings. A good indicator that the belly may be hollow, too. Cheap, cobbled from embezzled Colony funds. Reliably sturdy, sure, but Cadbury's welding tools would make quick work of the underside.

Since we were cloaked, too, he could take all the time he needed to make sure not to make too much noise. Attract attention. Blow our cover.

Because, this was where it got fuzzier. Whatever was inside the giant cloaked vessel was still a mystery, even if the presence of the ship wasn't.

The U-Fi connection name identified the ship as a laboratory, but SootFoot had heard stories.

"What do you mean 'stories?'" I pressed, standing behind the pilot as they used the aileron pedals to swerve out of the way of a hunk of debris. A defunct billboard, back before Terrex had figured out hologram tech. Most of the letters were rusted over, but I could tell it used to say *BLUE MANTLE COMPANY KINDLING*. Now, it just said *BACK*.

"Well," said SootFoot. "The clients are a bunch of Colony higher-ups. Constables, even. And Constables need pilots. Xenos aren't allowed in, of course, but our ears can't help but pick up on the…sounds."

"You're going to have to be more specific, FuzzFeet," Cad said.

Even though I was sure he said it to needle SootFoot, the Xeno didn't correct him. "Crying," they said. "Sometimes howling, barking, neighing…"

I grabbed the back of the pilot's seat to steady myself. "It must be torture."

"It can't be good," said SootFoot. "But that's not even the worst part. The last time I hit up a Xeno joint–some bar called the Paw Print up in the Neolevy quadrant, just on the edges of Inner–this pilot burst in, vomiting all over the place."

'That's normal, though, right," said Cad. "I mean, I threw up when I drank *all the time*."

SootFoot said, "Aye, it's normal *after you drink*. XG-B, they came crying, green in the face and practically coughing up their intestine. It was hours before they calmed down enough to talk about whatever their Captain had dragged them to. I'll never forget what they said. *How* they said it…" SootFoot looked green themself, so I took the wheel for them to dry-heave a few times over the tin trash can.

"What was it?" Ush pressed.

"B told us their Captain calls it the Z-side. Goes there once or twice an octaver, three times if their supervisor isn't breathing down their neck. But they stopped going for most of a year, so long B forgets about the whole thing. They were always made to wait in the ship, so they never saw anything. Until this time. Their Captain directed them to the dock-lot. Went in alone, as always. But didn't stay for hours, this time. Just minutes."

SootFoot renewed their grasp on the steering wheel. Took a wavering breath. "When he came back, it was with a baby. Newborn, and small-like. So small, it could barely stand to open it's eyes, the fluorescents in the cabin were too bright. When it could manage to, the pupils were vertical, like mine."

This, I understood without any clarification. A Xeno baby. But Xenos were born in indivitro pods, birthed in labs, raised in terrariums.

SootFoot went on, "The Captain refused to answer questions. He gave XG-B some hand-written coordinates, and, when they reached the location…"

"Let me guess," I said. "Right out the airlock?"

"No," SootFoot said. "That's the strangest part." The location was a domestic residence, out in the Icearks past the frostBelt. Some kind of unincorporated moon, with just this one farmhouse. A hectahorse and cometcow grazing next to a quaint home occupied by a small family. A man, a woman, and their five-yush-old child. "Or just abouts," clarified SootFoot. "The Captain handed the baby over to the woman, and she gives it to the child. Says 'She's been wanting someone to play with.' That's the last B ever saw of the kid."

Ush gave me a long sideways glance that she didn't even try to hide. "Captain?" she said.

"I'm fine," I insisted, but I had to swallow hard to make a convincing tone.

SootFoot pulled up on the steering wheel, and the Great Snake crawled to a stop under a bed of stars. "We're here."

Cadbury popped the hatch above to suction the ship to the underside of the invisible ship. A wall of black peppered with light that clanged like metal when we butted against it. Nelson played with the surface a moment, patting it with his palm. He even licked it. "Incredible…"

"Nelson!" Ush urged.

"I'm just trying to be thorough," said Cad, pulling his shaded goggles down as he readied the welding kit. A heat-proof handsaw hanging from his toolbelt, around his waist. "Isn't that part of the scientific process? Using your senses?"

"It's not *your* senses that'll get us through this," SootFoot said plainly. "You're talented, Cad. But in a dark room with no clues as to what's around you, a Xeno's nose is what you'll want to follow."

"I've always been more confident in my hearing," I noted. "You're the one with the talent for scenting, SootFoot."

Nelson completed a circular arc, molten, red, saw-flared welts eating so deeply into the steel that the plate of space popped off in Cad's hands with a bit of manual pressure.

Muted, orange light trickled in. Riding on the wide shafts of shadow pouring into the Great Snake from above.

SootFoot climbed the metal rungs up to the hatch, and waved us up. "If that's your way of saying I should take the lead, Jean,  I'll consider it an honor."

Heat spiked through me. There it was again, that signature Xeno trait: Showing off. In all it's obnoxious, misplaced, and completely attractive glory.

They heaved themself up through the darkened opening, and extended a hand down. I took it, leaning down to speak to Ush and Cad in the cabin of the Great Snake. "Someone needs to stay with the ship, be ready for a quick-getaway, keep it idling…"

"I can do that," Cad said. "Keep it idle, at least."

"You sure?" Ush ventured. Her tone was far from condescending, but she didn't mask her concern.

Cad nodded. "I'm ready."

Ush climbed up behind me, and lingered near the hatch as SootFoot pulled a handful of silver cranny disks out of their redsuit pocket. "Then stay safe, Nelson."

SootFoot pulled a square tin, like a rug made of foil, out of one of the crannies.

Cadbury would be in charge of making sure no one displaced it, because it wasn't a very convincing fake panel. Slightly raised, and a slightly darker metallic material than the other more milky-silver ones making up the plating of the floor, the tin rug was more lightweight, too. For a quick stowing process, allowing us to slide down without having to knock on the hatch and wait for Nelson to open it. This could mean death in case of pursuit.

Discovery, or death. Our impossible choice, but, per Ush's suggestion, we'd gambled on discovery. Cad had his hammer, I reminded myself this. He could take care of himself.

SootFoot patted the metal rug with their boot. "It could pass for a patch if not a plate."

"You keep telling yourself that," Ush grumbled, thrusting out an open hand. "Which one's have the oxygen, again?"

SootFoot rooted around in their suit pockets while I took stock of our surroundings.

We were in some kind of supply-closet. Walk-in size, and weirdly extravagant for a supply room. A crystalline chandelier bobbing above from an elegant, checkered ceiling. Gold piping attached to the groaning water heater tank, tucked into one corner of the closet. While a porcelain sink with melon-scented soap sat between shelving and a small cot.

On the top shelf, there were three half-melted black candles. Black ash scattered around them. An altar, I realized. One for the Great Griever.

The shelves below the altar were packed with cleaning supplies, industrial strength. All in the largest boxes and bottles. Detergent, bleach, soap, scrub brushes, sponges, rust solution, and de-odorizer. Packages boasting of the ability to remove every fluid from tub scum to blood.

"These ones," SootFoot found the green crannies, and handed two to Usher. "There's about four dozen masks, and twenty tanks."

"Cutting it close," said Ush, pocketing the crannies. "They'll be lightheaded, cramped, disoriented…"

"They'll be alive," said SootFoot. They stretched a closed hand out to me, and I took the four blue cranny disks. There weren't unlike the silver ones, except that they were empty. The extra-dimensional space was tight, hence the four crannies, but it would have to do for this rescue mission.

As for precedent, SootFoot recounted witnessing a party trick, years ago, involving a drunken magician ‘disappearing’ into their own cranny. The secret was the tank hidden inside. But that performer had had the benefit of preparing for a much longer time.

The inside of the crannies would be pitch dark for the cargo we intended to carry out in our pockets. They’d have to mask up on the outside before going in. Precious seconds slipping away, but for a vital act, so there was no avoiding this risk.

SootFoot braced their hand on the gold doorknob attached to the door at the end of the closet. “I find the ships,” they said. “You find the xenos.”

I nodded. “Just point me in the right direction, and we’ll take it from there.”

Ush tapped her watch, and a glowing projection of the time sprang into existence: Twenty-Nine Avins to the Eleventh Auron. “We meet back here at Twelve O’Auron,” she confirmed. “We leave whether the other team is on time or not.”

SootFoot grinned. “Every Griever’s gotta know when to cut the tether,” their nose twitched. Nostrils flaring.

“We’re not just Grievers,” I said. “We’re orbitters.”

SootFoot turned the knob, and swung the door open unto utter darkness. “What’s the difference?”

“We’re too cheap to cut the cord,” I said. “We’d rather reuse it.”

We moved as one into the shadows.

SootFoot crept through the spacious, empty den on feet as quiet as snowfall. Leading the way, but only half the time. Surging forward to investigate strange scents amidst the leather upholstery covering the squat and stylish furniture around the den. “It’s all so…*sterile*.” They sneezed, flying backward into a vase that I had to steady to keep from falling off of a nightstand.

The surface of the vase was painted with nature scenery. A vast, golden field of grass. Nude humans relaxing in the mid-wash sunlight, stroking the heads of gentle, grazing beasts.

Earth animals, I recognized. Oxen, and horses. Pigs, and goats. The latter of which were depicted with large, curling, black horns.

A soft bleat bled past my lips as I staggered away from the vase.

"It's okay," Ush gripped my ear, and rubbed it in much the same way the humans on the vase petted their domesticated animals. "Relax, Captain."

"I'm fine," I lied, fighting to get my breath under control. I jerked my ear out of Ush's grasp, turning to SootFoot. "Forget the chemicals, what do you think of our position?"

SootFoot inhaled deeply. Tasted the air, its past, whose lungs it had occupied. "There's only small traces of heated air throughout the place. I expect the coldest pocket will be the parking hangar–" Ush and I followed them across the thick, gray carpet of the den. There weren't any pictures on the walls, and I wasn't sure why I expected there to be.

For all the sterility and clear fuss about keeping clean and neat, this room had a strange homey quality. Artificial warmth, carpet over steel plating. Empty, polished nightstands. No dust, no footprints, no sign of life. A slice of a home that wasn't anyone's in particulars.

I wondered, why would a lab want to include cozy, casual rooms such as this. Maybe to lull subjects into a false sense of security? Subjects, or patrons. Because we were surely being watched.

There were no obvious signs, except for SootFoot's explanation of the splitting feed streaming out of the structure. It had to be a hidden bug, I could almost feel the weight of its eyes on me. Boring *into me*.

"What's that thing you mentioned?" I asked. "The dis-what-ner?"

"Disruptor," SootFoot patted down yet another pocket. Produced a black metal box with a blinking green light. "This'll block the transmission for six hours. Whoever's watching the stream right now is seeing a replay of the last twenty-four aurons."

"You're sure it's on?" I prodded.

"It's on," SootFoot assured me. "Janelle's specialty is disruption tech. Code scrambling scripts, computer frying commands…It's easier to fuck things up than fix things up." SootFoot's gray eyes softened, color touching their cheeks. "That's Nelle's favorite saying, anyway." Sootfoot chuckled, snorting softly through their mottled pink nose.

Instead of a door, this den only had a heavy gray curtain drawn around the doorway. This, SootFoot drew back to peer through.

We followed suit. This corridor had a long, red rug strewn through it. Doorways with curtains drawn and half-drawn dotting the hall on either side.

"This wing's empty," said SootFoot. "Everyone's further into the ship, one pocket of warmth to your Ten O'Auron, one to your Two. A few strong scents coming from around the clock, so to speak. The outer corridor of the ship– Could be sleeping residents, could be guards."

I took a moment to look down each side of the corridor. Every creature has some innate sense of direction, even if it wasn't mostly accurate. Mine had been honed over hours in the piloting simulator. My mental layout of my location laid out like a clock in my head, as we were taught back in Scout School. Twelve segments, the Ten just three or so avins in if we kept to the left and wove through the corridors without encountering any obstacles.

The Two would be a bit further away, maybe a five avin detour and to the far left. "How do you wanna do this, Captain?" Ush asked.

"The same way we always do," I said. "Together."

Ush nodded. “I’m right behind you.”

“One more thing,” SootFoot dug around inside a silver cranny for a handful of blue metal pearls. Stun-stones. They handed a dozen or so to Ush before pocketing the same amount for themself. Next, SootFoot closed their hand around a rusted crowbar, pulling it free from the pocket dimension. “For cabin access.”

“Cabin,” said Ush. “Or cranial?”

SootFoot practiced a full swing. “Ask that First Mate of yours, any good tool has multiple uses.” They slipped the crowbar into their beltloop. “You want anything from our supply-cranny, Jean?”

I considered this a moment. A mop might come in handy, but could also just slow me down. “I think I’m set.”

SootFoot nodded at my horns. “And what a set it is.”

Ush rolled her eyes, “Enough flirting, you two.”

But this wasn’t enough for SootFoot. They extended their hand as if to clasp mine, but stroked my tail, instead. I failed to hide the resulting shiver. “Remember who you are out there, Jay. To *them*. A savage. An *animal*.” They stole off to the left side of the corridor in one quick, smooth motion, and on all fours. “So act like it!”

The pilot was fast on those furred, padded feet. Up one axon, around the corner the next.

I gave some thought to their parting words, closing my eyes so my mind wouldn’t confuse anything my ears picked up on. Eyes, ears, mind. I had to simplify, in order to reach out, so to speak.

So used to tuning out the endless droning of the universe around me, I had suppressed the wealth of clues aboard the vessel. Chatter, whimpering, and smoking thrumming out from the

heart of the ship like steady beats. In waves of intensity, as if on cue, or schedule, of some kind. Or ceremony. “Follow me,” I said over my shoulder, bracing my legs against the ground to push off. Use the momentum to surge down the corridor.

Ush held a steel brick, one of Tendon’s treats, at the ready as she bounded after me.

As one, we wound into the ship. Burrowing through the narrow halls like a parasite into the mind of a host. The only footsteps our own–rapid metal drumming in time with my heart.

My right ear twitched as the hiss of shuffling cloth whispered through a door I hadn’t noticed, to our side. Almost hidden in the wall, just like our makeshift panel rug, but much more convincing. Embedded in the panelling, with decorative bolts along the edges.

The door gave a faint creak as it swung outward.

The man that strode into the corridor wore a patch-ridden white suit. Four flowers, just the petalled head of the plant. But one additional flower with the green stem. In the center, between the four. I didn’t recogize the color rank. If navy was Cultural Councilor– the hundred-plus officials voted in by the residents of the thirteen Colonies, five from each planet – and gold was Envoy status, what was white?

Councilors, as representatives, as far as I knew, were meant to live among those they served. Overseeing the well-being of the planets Terrex committed entire genocides to claim for human habitation. Sure, Councilor Matthew Cadbury wasn’t doing a good job of it, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t the exception, rather than the rule.

Now, I was just confusing myself.

“That’s a Doctor,” Ush supplied, reading my expression.

“I see,” I said. So what he was doing off of his Colony was the least puzzling thing about him. Cleanshaven, with a high-rank’s signature blond ponytail. “That’s the Surgeon General.”

We flattened ourselves against the walls perpendicular to the Doctor as he hustled down the corridor. One hand clutching a clipboard, the other in his suit pocket. A calm, even bored, expression etched into his face.

There was no hotshot holstered on his hip, or across his back. No point in intercepting him. So we let him get away.

Ush had to pry at the sliding steel panel he'd strode out of before it slid open.

It was as if we were staring down a whale's giant, black gullet. Another corridor, but this one with no lighting. Just some echoing string music, violins. That, and the dull drone of distant chatter.

"What do you think?" said Ush.

"Sounds like the way top-side."

"What are you talking about?" Ush leaned her ear toward the tunnel. "All I hear is whooshing, like wind."

"Just trust me," I said. "Can you remember the way to this door?"

Usher found of Tendon's steel biscuits in his pocket. Braced the steel brick against the door, and dragged the end across. Creating a long, pale slash across the steel panel. "I will now."

Now, that we knew what the false panels looked like, it was clear that the lit corridors sprawling before us were organized into wings, like a hospital. With magnetic, numbered labels attached to the walls just inside the mouth of each hall. *2175 ... 2172 ... 2165 ... 2163 ...*

"The years don't make sense," I whispered. "XG-Zs are taken away at fifteen, like the rest of us. Just to a different place. 2175, that's not possible."

"Unless they're newborns," Ush said. "Babies cry, but we're not the only ones with access to muting-glaze, Captain."

We decided to explore the corridor marked *2170*. None of the ten doors – five on each side – were labelled. Not with a year, or letter. One, however, in the center on the right, did have a metallic clipboard hanging from a small metal hook in the wall next to it. Written material, *printed* on Earth paper, just like that *Beginner's Guide to Treason*. That was a sign that somebody wanted to keep something quiet, if I ever saw one.

There was a single, pin-sized hole in the panel-door. For some specialty key, I figured. "What now?"

"Stand back," Ush knelt by the keyhole. Produced her League of Galactic Healers I.D. card. Swinging out a recessed, needle-thin, metal rod on the side of the card. "It's a standard specimen lock."

Ush inserted the key, and the panel popped aside with a faint, metallic whine.

A wall of rotten, humid air collapsed on us. Flies as big as our fingers, and crusted in something red hugged the walls, as if they'd been feeding on whatever was inside for months with no interruption.

Due to the unchecked heat, black and pink mold crawled along the shaggy, stained carpet. Fuzzy, green splotches blooming up around a silver dish of water, with a dead fly twitching in the middle of it.

The room was a metal box, though the presence of one rusted bolt in the corner ceiling panel stuck out to me. One of those cameras, a bug, that Janelle had told SootFoot about. "Ush?"

Ush crept closer to a metal cot in one corner of the room. The mattress padding half-strewn across the floor, only a thin white sheet remaining. Pulled taut over the bed to cover a trembling lump beneath. "Is anyone there?" Usher took ahold of the shivering sheet. Gently pried it back.

The tiny, floppy-eared xeno underneath grasped at the sheet a moment before giving up and burying their snout in the mattress. Dark brown streaks–old, reeking blood–decorated their papery, white gown. Theirs, and that of the sleeping Xeno under them.

No, not under them. *Attached* to them.

In the cowering position, their blood-strewn gowns hiked up to their midriffs, the festering sutures attaching one twin to the other were unmissable. Green crust and frothing red blood framed the wound, stretching the skin so tautly that each of their navels and nipples were skewed sideways.

"What the…?" Ush knelt even in the moldy carpet. Fishing around in her pockets for the oxygen masks, the Waiting Room cranny, a pair of latex gloves, a surgical mask, and her stethoscope. "Can I have a look at you?"

The five-year-old xeno–the one that was awake, anyway–looked up at her. Their stubby, beige tail trembling. Though, I had a suspicion the fur was supposed to be white. "You can do whatever you want with me," they said. Their voice was hollow and high-pitched, but there was the cadence of adult speech behind it. A creepy pairing. "But you can't hurt *them*, anymore."

With every iota of strength in their tiny body, they heaved themself to a sitting position.

Their twin remained sleeping. Eyes closed, thick, brown crust clustered around their lashes. Dried snot, with tendrils of blood, beneathe their nostrils. There was a greenish tint to their skin, with weird rings, like circular bruises, spotting their tiny chest. Which, I couldn't help but notice, wasn't rising and falling with breath.

"Great Griever…" The room rolled across my vision in a sea of flies and blood. That scent–it wasn't just filth. Filth was manageable. It was *decay*.

Ush held the end of the stethoscope to the deceased twins' chest, and listened for so long that footsteps echoed up the corridor. We were out of time.

She produced an oxygen tank from one of the crannies in her pocket. Extending the silicone mask to the young, living xeno. "No one will ever hurt you again."

The Xeno's long, floppy ears perked at the sight of the mask. They yanked one wrist, and the sheet fell to their waist, revealing a thick iron chain attached to the wall. One end clasped around their wrist, like a cuff. "I wish grown-ups would stop lying."

Ush produced a nail file, and a small, metal mallet from her labcoat. When she'd filed through half of the width of the metal cuff, she cracked the mallet against it, braced on the little, wooden bedside table.

*RING!* "So much for our cover," I said as she banged the cuff again, producing another ringing chime. The tinny tap of the footsteps outside was growing nearer, and had doubled. "They're coming."

"I'm going as fast as I can," The Xeno's wrist popped free on the fifth swing, but, by that time, long, black shadows had fallen over the tiny square of white light pouring out of the enclosure.

A cold, sterile saveragery overtook me as I lunged at our company.

My horns thrumming in time with my heartbeat, hot and sharp as they glided through the torso of a Terran in gold. Choking off their shouts to a soft whistling tune, then to a gurgle, then to nothing.

Counselor Edgar Rosewine was a fighter, but not a gusher. The slow punches he threw gave me enough leverage to wrench him onto the ground. There, he wrestled me away from him.

Arching to keep his stomach away from the tip of my horns, taking ahold of my shoulders and shoving with everything he was worth. Lucky for me, he was worthless.

Rosewine's body seeped. His suit growing heavy, red intermingling with the navy-colored cloth. Tacky on my palms when I hefted him on top of the Constable's corpse.

Huh, it'd been years since I'd witnessed a stack of bodies, but I wasn't flashing back to Kaysev. In fact, the only curdle in my stomach was the sudden wish that, somehow, before they died–before I killed them–XG-L could have seen this.

Constable Kara Clanger had something Matthew and Rosewine didn't, and she drew it at the sight of the two dead officials. Aiming her hotshot through the doorway, directly at me.

"Help me out, here?" I huffed, clutching the stitch in my side.

Usher lobbed a steel biscuit across the metal room.

It slammed into Clanger's temple.

Her gun discharged as she dropped it.

A hot, red streak eating across the shag carpeting as Usher helped the two xenos–alive and not–into the Waiting Room cranny.

The first, orange licks of flame erupted from the smoking streak. The unconscious Constable falling face-first into the fire.

None of us made any move to roll her out of the way, stepping over her as she fried to exit into the hall.

A sprinkler in the hall activated–cold, wet droplets raining down on the Doctor and I so we slid as we bound from room to room.

Only about half of them were occupied in any meaningful way, it turned out.

Because half of the residents were dead.

It was three aurons and five wings before we encountered another official.

By that point, every room had been searched, and every horrifying reality about the situation had come to light.

For one, Operation Z–this series of laboratories and observatories–was a torture chamber. But not a silver-site like the supposed branding and fighting arena out in the correctionBelt. Instead, this was some kind of "white-site." I supposed, that was the difference between any facility dealing with Unhumans versus humans of any kind. Griever rebel, Terran traitor, violent or petty criminal. Torturing humans had to be suppressed, hidden away from white, gold, and navy-suits alike. Torturing xenos, however, seemed to be something everyone could participate in.

Some xenos, especially the teenage ones, had limbs removed. This, they informed us, was a form of punishment.

The younger children had been experimented on much more brutally, injected with pest poisons, cleaning agents, rocket fuel, and even their own urine. Clipboards with details of their regimented torture explained the goal of this: To better understand how the body could withstand such treatment, and create healing tonics for Terrex soldiers.

This was not a very convincing explanation. Especially given the truly horrifying experiments, the ones that had left xenos with their intestine on the outside, hanging from a hook at their bedside. Some had been flayed and injected with Kaleidizen ichor, dripping into them intravenously to allegedly incur Kaleid regeneration abilities. Others had their genitals removed and stitched over their mouths.

The nursery had been reduced to a wing of wailing infants, some choking to death on their own anguish if the mold, heat, or the bacteria of living in filth didn't kill them, first.

In total, twenty-five or so xenogenes had been smuggled into the Waiting Room.

Only one-third of them had been hustled off to the labs at fifteen. True XG-Zs. The other two-thirds, the younger children, were the product of rampant bribery for time alone with the teenage experiments.

“That explains the baby SootFoot was talking about,” I said. Which meant there were untold numbers of xeno children who’d been sold off across the Galaxy.

We came to the door with the gray slash-mark across it.

Ush pushed aside the panel, and we ducked into the shadow-bound corridor. “What about the guest-list?” I said. “We can track the movements of the visitors, find out where their lab-babies might be hidden away.”

“Janelle and SootFoot already took care of that, remember?” said Ush, moving the panel aside behind us to shut us into the tunnel. “They really did think of everything.”

“Everything except *where the fuck are we*.” The footsteps and faint music across the vast darkness of the hall had shifted to being overhead. If this huge, expansive web of rooms had only been the basement, how large could the actual vessel be?

A claw closed around my heart as I flashed back to the room back at our dock-lodge on Medusa. SootFoot’s proposal, their explanation about how it was risky. So much so that a stranger was their last resort.

Maybe this wasn’t just risky, it was a death trap. There were already dozens of ghosts coasting through the sub-vessel corridors, what were two more?

We trudged on for cometons, black yards falling behind us to yield to more. Ten, fifteen, twenty, forty, sixty… This truly was the galaxy’s largest vessel, whatever it was. It must’ve cost a fortune to afford to cloak the entire thing.

At once, five cometons to our back, a cylindrical shaft of green light pierced through the tunnel with a faint, electrical *BEEP*. Revealing the metal rungs embedded in the wall under it that we'd nearly left behind.

Spotless, black boots attached to a silver spacesuit swung into sight. A black suitcase clattering to the steel floor between the legs before the official began climbing down.

As the beam of light thinned, I could only make out a flash of the official. He was Terran, a pale, older man, in his sixties or seventies. With thick, gray facial hair, and a silvery, five-inch ponytail. Some kind of high-level official, but I'd never actually seen someone in a silver spacesuit.

I was so puzzled by his appearance, I forgot to duck out of the way when he picked up his suitcase. Luckily for us, he chose to walk back toward the entrance to the laboratory.

Now, there was just to wait for his footsteps to recede completely.

*BEEP*.

Another, single electrical note from above, and the green shaft of light burst through the tunnel, again. Along with two Terran officials in navy spacesuits. One a man, and one a woman.

The man had reddish-brown hair cropped to three-inch low-rank standard.

The woman had a five-inch ponytail. A high-ranking official, maybe his superior. She had gray streaks in her thick, brown hair. While he was in his mid twenties, at most, she was easily in her thirties or forties.

Her voice when she spoke, however, was youthful. Fierce, as any officials would be, per their training, but also weirdly familiar. "This way," she drew her holstered hotshot, bounding off down the corridor in the direction of the silver-suit.

The young man closed the hatch above, and followed her, drawing his own weapon. He flipped a switch on the barrel, and a jet of gold light shone on the man in the silver-suit.

"*HUBER!"*

Several cometons away, now, he shielded his eyes. "Who's there?" He peered through the narrow beam of light. "*Oliver? Cotton?*"

The man pulled the trigger, and a single beam of red heat wrapped around Huber's head, and boiled his brain before us. Skin peeling away to skull peeling away to bubbling, pink soup.

Ush's hand slid into mine as the light switched off. She yanked me toward the rungs.

With no regard for the thumping noises, we scrambled up the ladder.

"*Who's there*?" The man shone his yellow beam on us as we beat against the shut hatch.

There was no handle to grip it with from the underside. Nor did there seem to be a keyhole, like back in the lab.

The man chuckled low under his breath. "*No way! You've got some real gonads on you, Sable. Your girl wasn't wrong about that*."

That voice. The one that had been haunting me for septurs.

Ush and I climbed down.

The woman in the navy suit ventured closer to Huber's body. She felt around in his pocket for his keycard, then picked up his black suitcase.

As she rejoined her companion, we looked between them both. Their frames, their eyes, their facial features, hairstyles, and even the general energy around them both was different, everything except the voice.

There were silver, elaborate wristwatches on both on their arms.

I'd never had any reason to notice when Pool disguised themself, and kicked myself for my lack of intuition. What kind of Captain would ignore such a key trait of some of the most exclusive tech in the entire universe?

Worse, what kind of lover wouldn't recognize their own girlfriend?

"Ant?" I reached across the darkness between me and the woman in the navy suit. She closed the remaining space, threading our fingers.

"You shouldn't be here," she said. "The rumors we've heard, it's nothing I want you to see."

"I get that, now," said Ush, nodding to Captain Olivia Crest. "You weren't saying it wasn't a worthwhile mission, you were just shielding SootFoot."

Crest started. "Soot didn't–?"

"They didn't come with us, no," I finished. "They're in the dock-lot, raiding the parked ships. Nelson's got the Great Snake running attached to a bore-hole in the underside."

Crest heaved a long, deep sigh. "*Thank you*."

Ant squeezed my fingers, grasped my forearms to draw me closer to her. "I understand if you don't want to kiss me, like this."

"Good," I shrugged out of her grasp. "And don't push it, it'll be a long time before I'm ready to do *anything* with you, again. I'm happy to know you're safe, but *this* is what you sold my crew out for?"

"Don't say it like it's such a frivolous pursuit," she shot back. "If you've already seen the labs, then you know what we're fighting for!" She drew her hotshot, and thrust the barrel back toward Huber's corpse. "I don't care how many more of these raping, racist lunatics have to die before we're free."

"What's *free*?" I asked. "Don't tell me you're raving like this about a country that doesn't even exist yet."

"Countries are for the Earth-ridden," Crest cut in. "They can keep their countries, Grievus would be a *Nation*. Of orbitters, immigrants, xenos, humans, octils, aarduliks, Kaleids–"

"Unicorns?" I supplied. "Get real, the both of you! It's one thing to free tortured kids, any decent person would do that. It's another to go on about overthrowing the government."

Ant said, "Are we to believe there have been no 'decent people' until us?" she said. "Decent people overlook a lot more than torture, Jean. Just accept that it's down to *us* to take action, just say it. After the Harmony–"

"Stop."

"Someone should've killed Starling a *long time ago*."

"Maybe," I said. "But what about him?" I nodded at Huber's body.

Crest answered, "Remember Drip, Pond, and River, back on Vuzilika?"

"Less than *you* do, apparently," Ush said.

Crest ignored her snark, "The *Vojiviq* mentioned Huber, *by name*. There must be some connection. And, if there is, that would mean the Director of the Central Beureau of Inquiry was in communication with Kaleidizen radicals."

"Another incredible headline?" I said. "If you'd risk it all just for good press, you really *are* just a Colony dog!"

"You may as well just speak to me, straight-on," Ant cut in. "I know you're wanting to."

So I did, and I didn't hold back. "You deliberately misled your *Captain*. Let your crew fly directly into a trap set by a retired Colony official. Then *abandoned* us when you would need us most–"

"Jean?" She turned a dial on the watch, and the visage of the middle-aged woman shimmered into Antiope Adams. She hesitated to step forward, but made it to me just in time to catch me when I collapsed to my knees.

"When *we* needed you most," I shoved away from her, drew a forearm across my face to clear the tears. "Just like a Terran, you only think of yourself."

"You pushed me away, Starshine." She helped me up. I let her.

"That was wrong," I admitted. "But I was still trying to make sense of it. The lying, right to my face. Makes me wonder what else is fake."

"I'll tell you," said Ant. "Any semblance of courage. Of *surety*. I *don't* know what'll happen next, and I *am* scared. But I'm more scared of what'll happen if we never *try*."

"Speaking of–" Ush cleared her throat. "Those tanks only have about one auron's worth of oxygen, each. If we're going to do this, it's literally now or never."

"I see," I said. "Astute observation, Doctor Lugomir. In that case," I placed a hand on Antiope's face, and she leaned down to accept the kiss. Brisk, but hot, wet, and pulsing with promise. "I *orbit* you, Starshine. But, if what happened back in that lab is what the United Colonies of Terrex stands for, then I don't want to marry you. Our love doesn't have to be validated in their eyes, only ours."

"Ours," said Ant, "and the Great Griever."

A long, cold wind–like exhaled breath–washed over us and through the tunnel. And, at once, I was sure she was right. But I was also sure that something had to give. That we'd come to a crossroads, maybe the same that the Great Griever tuned guitars at. To accept such an instrument would ensure luck for the musician, the legend said. But a two-toned kind of fortune, bittersweet and never satisfying.

Ant cupped my cheek. Kissed the fresh tears, there. “Can I still take your name?”

I tried to take in a breath, but it was as if sand were pouring into my lungs. Grain by grain, as in an hourglass. Ush had said it best, it was now or never. “I think it’s best,” I said, “if you keep your own.”

Antiope searched my eyes for something, I couldn’t tell what.

“We were going to poke around upstairs,” I said, mostly to break the silence, “but if y’all are both ready to go, the Great Snake is running and waiting.”

“We can’t leave,” said Captain Crest. A low-volume buzz rang up from her pocket, and she pulled out a vibrating cellphone. Swiped something on the screen until it stopped ringing, then put it away again. “Huber’s keycard, we *just* got access to the most exclusive offices aboard. We have to take the opportunity to tap their phones, Nelle’s been experimenting with visobugging.”

“How’d you get access to this tunnel, anyhow?” I asked. “The hatch is locked shut.”

Antiope produced a second keycard. Not the one she’d swiped from the corpse next to us, but a similar one with a navy color. And the name CADBURY underneath a small photo of Matthew Cadbury facing forward with a neutral expression. “Cad’s brother was pretty distracted after he whipped out the Streaker…”

“You were thinking ahead the *whole time*,” I groaned. A migraine threatened to materialize behind my eyes, and I rubbed my temples to keep it at bay. “Whether I like it or not, that kind of thinking is what my crew needs right now. Times are changing whether we try to keep up or not, *something’s coming*. But from here on out, we have to share things with each other, okay?”

I looked around at Olivia Crest, Usher, and Antiope.

"Okay," said Crest.

"Okay," said Ush.

"Okay," said Ant.

"All right," I nodded. "So, if there's prestigious offices aboard, what kind of vessel is this? A cubicleCraft? Some kind of dragoon meant for field training?"

"That would explain the size," said Ush.

"This is exactly why I wanted to keep you far away from this mission," Ant said. "Jay, we're aboard the Intergalactic Space Station."

Just then, after everything, there was no place I'd rather be.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Stories have a way of making everything more-than. Words have an inflating quality like that, the more you say, the more sentences articles spent fawning over the elegant, velvet, royal blue curtains adorning the deck– the complex, cohesive, culturally-rich wardrobes draped over the bodies of the most important living beings in the universe – the further away everything got.

Up close, I was less than impressed.

The deck of the Intergalactic Space Station was an interwoven deep-brown paneling that it took me entire avins to recognize as wood. Not steel, the silvery grays and iron blacks were hidden away behind layers of gold paint. Behind marble columns holding up the sprawling balcony. The guardrails twisted gold rods atop glittering panes of spotless glass that Xenos with spray bottles and cloths were inspecting for blemishes.

Despite the exposed conditions, there was no need for the metallic boots of the Murx racing track. Or the heavy tethers and binds of an orbitter welding a pierced hull. Rather, the Intergalactic had a charged, invisible field of artificial gravity emitting from metal posts that were installed five cometons aparts from each other along the deck. Meaning the vacuum of Open Space–black and lit only, now, by brilliant fluorescent light of the ship–was just twelve feet above any given standing point.

More wood was present in the heavy, oaken doors dotting the deck. *LGBT Economists' Lounge* and *Women's Empowerment Lobby* carved and decorated in gold leafing across the fronts. Every other door had a painted glass window installed in it. The first depicting a blue, green, and brown planet sparkling in the blackness of space. The second a silvery capsule leaving the planet orbit alone in the cosmos. The third a golden wolf suckling two pale twins, Aries and Athena Adams.

The fourth was the one Ant took the most interest in.

It depicted a syringe leaking green glass shards–amulius–that dropped out of the needle to become a fixed star among many. The blood of her father, scattered across the cosmos. Burning away in the core of every spacecraft's fuel tank.

I'd never considered how long it would be before they asked to bleed *her*.

The Terrans reclining in gaggles of glass-clinking camaraderie around us weren't like the Terrans who'd died back on the Undergal. There were thousands of them, not hundreds. All in white, beige, navy, gold, or silver spacesuits. Many pairs of boots spotless, as if they'd never seen wear off of the Intergal.

There were other kinds of people–Octils, Kaleidizens, Grievers, Xenos. All interwoven in a web of shaking hands and clapped backs. Fraternity patches and military placements. Wine, beef, ice, and genocide.

As for the music, this was certainly not the Undergal. There weren't speakers piping in music, but live string players dragging long, wooden bows across polished, wooden, hollow instruments.

One human– a Griever–off to the side, sat at a piano that was bolted to the deck. Playing along to the strings with a grin. More than one gold-clad Constable handed their attending pilot their drink so they could clap along.

"Councilor Cotton," a man in a beige suit approached Antiope. Right. Even though she'd switched the Easer back on a while ago, I'd forgotten other people knew this disguise. Knew this *person*. Whoever they'd been.

He clapped a hand on Ant's shoulder, motioning to the piano-player. "Can you believe it? I was always told Burn-offs didn't have the capacity to learn such things."

"Burn-offs?" I came up beside Ant. Stepped in front of her, just slightly. At worst, he'd think I was an overprotective pilot.

"You know," said the man. "Dark matter!" He chuckled. "Back in the fifties, my mother used to tell me the Hera was so ill-equipped the radiation is what burned them brown. 'The problem, Frankie, is it also blackened their brains. Like toast.'" This man, Frank, erupted into another bout of laughter. Swiping at his eyes. "Good ole Mom was always quick with a joke."

"She was very funny," Ant agreed, though she made no effort to laugh, like she would've for Starling. I supposed she didn't have it in here, anymore. "I must get going, Senator. Councilman Oliver and I are actually training a Phoenix recruit. Doctor Lewis is joining the Reserve Terrex Defense Force."

"I see," said Senator Frank, nodding at Ush and Captain Crest. "I was pleased to see the Mandatory Service Expansion go into effect last year. It makes no sense for only Terrans to defend Terrex, it's about time these Burn-Offs started earning their keep."

"I couldn't agree more," Crest said. "It's been a while since we touched down, could you point us in the direction of the Defense Lounge?"

"You're going in the right direction," said the Senator. "It's just a few feet forward on the right. The *silver* handle, remember?"

"I do, now," said Crest. "You know how the ole memory gets after a few post-conference beers."

"Don't get me started!" Senator Frank laughed, but held their own head as if in true memory of some past pain.

"I must say, Senator," said Ush. "I didn't expect so many attention-hogging politicians to hole up in an invisible craft."

"Well, every good politician has a public face, and a private face," Frank's response was easy, almost rehearsed. Criticism came with the territory for this man. "As for the cloaking, it's only three days before that freak festival. After the egg-incident, Athena isn't taking any chances with security. That's why we're adrift at the edge of our own galaxy, I presume. No one's confirmed that last part."

Right. In all the whirlwind around the Blunder, I'd forgotten it was almost another Volturnalia. "Smart," I said. "The Colonies really thinks of everything."

"So we don't have to," Senator Frank plucked a glass of wine off a platter carried by a Xeno. "To Terrex!" He gulped down the deep red wine, a burgundy dribble running down one side of his mouth.

We parted ways with the Senator. Pushed on past the cello player. Past a group of Constables comparing the size of Kaleidizen scales they'd collected. Past a raised pen where two xenos in boxing gloves clobbered each other as rows of Terrans cheered.

Past a Terran in a gold suit who was posted up against one of the metal poles emitting the artificial gravity. He had a holstered hotshot, one of just a few present–or, at least, in view–on the deck. And a bushy, reddish-brown mustache. Three-inch low-rank regulation hair that matched in color. Young, with big, blue eyes, he inspected the pole. Crouching as if to look into the gravitational field, I figured he was either a tourist or in the engineering unit.

The Defense Lounge did, indeed, have a silver handle when we came to it. A hulking wooden door. Thick and as cold as steel, with a gold placard reading *RESTRICTED* embedded in the center of it.

A small electronic box with a red light was installed next to the door.

Ant held Director Huber's ID card up to the red light.

It flashed green, and the door clicked open

Crest reached into her pocket, and pulled out three items. They resembled crannies, black metal discs, but with tiny, tin cones on one side. The side with the small holes dotting the surface, like some kind of speaker.

“It’s a receiver,” she explained. “We just need to hide it behind a painting, a flag… They usually have things like that in these lounges.”

“So you’ve done this before?” I asked.

Ant swung the door out for Crest to stride through the doorway. Crest spoke over her shoulder, “Never.”

We followed her inside so the door could shut behind us, but the four of us weren’t alone.

There were already two people seated at the large mahogany table bolted in place at the center of the room.

One clad in a spacesuit of silken violet, a purple almost as intense a color as the scales which adorned the towering Kaleidizen. The only spots of other color on them was their writhing, pink, wet external gills. Three on each side of their head, straining to taste the change in atmosphere. This, their sprawling, fuzzy, branching, green rhizomes, and the long, bright orange welt across their throat.

All eighteen of their fingers drummed across the table as four of their eyes fixed on us. The other two settling on the person seated across the long table.

It was a human man, a Terran. With the five-inch pony-tail of a high-ranking official. Hair drawn back, black and peppered with strands of brilliant silver.

He was in his sixties or seventies, with dark circles around his eyes that appeared to have been engraved there. In his papery, wrinkled skin, pale as that Earthen moon, and just as pocked, too. With scars that ran along his arms, like burns or healed slash-wounds.

He had age-spots that mottled the words of his faint tattoos. His eyes, though, were ageless. Hard, piercing, and black as the Blunder tucked away in Ant's pocket. Glaring up at us from his smiling, angular face. A familiar one.

The Terran wore a golden suit, one riddled with patches. The usual flowers, stars, and bounding, golden wolves. The suckling twins. Embroidered representations of the blue, green, and red planets, moons, and stars they'd pillaged, and stolen the light of.

The only real difference between a Constable's uniform and this Terran's was the name sewn into the top right corner of the front of his suit: ADAMS.

"Excuse us, Secretary," Crest was the first to speak, bowing and nodding at each of the dignitaries. "We were told your meeting had been moved to tomorrow."

"Let me guess," said the Kaleidizen. "Senator Frank Morsels?"

"The very same," Crest winked. "Should we get out of your hair? Come back later?"

"No worries," said Aries Adams. His voice was deep, warm, syrupy, and, somehow, nostalgic. The voice of my childhood, rumbling up from the speaker during every insurance commercial, every public service announcement from the twenty-one-fifties. Every blaring alert: *Wheat Shortage! Ion Rationing! Escaped Inmate!* He pushed away from the table, rising to his feet. "We were just wrapping up."

The Kaleidizen rolled all six of their eyes in a way that seemed very familiar, and got to their talons, too. "If you say so, Secretary." They stepped around us, following Aries to the big,

closed, wooden door. “You can’t say I haven’t told you what stance the Eldeniv will take on this Caniscen mining contract.”

“You can’t say *I* haven’t clued you into the incredible rewards if we partnered on this,” said Aries. “Your people would be set for centuries if we secured access to the Suqelus Belt. And we only use the stuff as building material, you use it as sustenance.”

“There’s no shortage of metals in space, Adams.”

“Not *yet*,” said the Secretary of Space. “Just think it over. I’ll expect your *real* answer at the Peace Conference.”

Aries held open the door, and the Kaleidizen strode outside.

With both their backs turned, Crest flitted around the lounge. Stuck one receiver beneath one of the heavy, leather seats. Another behind a limp Terrex flag hanging from a pole in one corner of the room: The golden wolf and twins enlarged and in detail along a deep, dark, blue backdrop.

The last, Crest hid behind a painting of Athena Adams hanging over a vase of flowers. Real, live ones. Or, at least, the clipped ends of ones that *had* been living.

They were a peculiar sight. Long orange petals, with violet, blue, and red accents.

“It’s a bird of paradise,” Ant explained. “It *was*.”

Aries turned around, nodding at Ant. “Very knowledgeable, Councilor,” he said. “I hope to see you during the Peace Conference at the Martian Consulate Complex.”

“You will,” said Ant, meeting his gaze head-on. Her voice was steady. Steely.

“Perfect,” said the Secretary. “Be sure to remind Frank of the visomail we sent last week about the new meeting schedule. Oh, and congrats on the new addition to your family. We didn’t

expect to see you back so soon from maternity leave. Nor you, Oliver. A little birdie told me you were attending a relative's funeral back in Miami."

Crest chuckled. "News of my father's death was *greatly exaggerated*. He had a stroke, but he's still up and kicking. You know how the office gossip mill is, spinning everything out of proportion."

Aries smiled, "Of course. Please, give my best to your father. He was a fine Constable, in his day."

"I will, sir," said Crest.

The Secretary let the heavy door thud into a closed position, shutting the four of us into the Defense Lounge. We had only altogether managed one exhale before the room rocked as something impacted with the door.

"*DAD!?*" Ant wrenched the door open and Aries *did* fall inward.

On the green-carpeted floor of the Defense Lounge, the Secretary of Space didn't look like an icon of the Colonies. Like an infallible figurehead of imperialism. Aries looked like an old man with poor balance.

His thin skin stripping back upon impact with the scrubby carpet. Thick, green amulius pulsing out of the minor scrapes at his knuckles.

Several Constables surged to the doorway, but Aries waved them away. Hoisting himself up using the table as he pointing at the deck. "Not me! Pool, help Pool!"

Just outside the Defense Lounge, Pool the Elder was pinned to the deck. A Constable, the young low-rank with the reddish-brown hair and mustache who'd been camped outside the room, was lording over the Kaleidizen. A boot on their chest, and a hotshot aimed at their head.

"Go ahead, *bazov*!" Elder Pool hissed. "You humans never did get the real secret to concentrated heat."

Human lasers usually deflected off of Kaleidizen scales, it was true. Only under a heavy barrage could Colony guns penetrate that durable plating. And, even then, when you felled a Kaleid, they usually just took a second to heal, then spring back up. This, I'd witnessed in person, back on Vuzilika.

Still, a direct headshot.

The Kaleidizen head had the least plating, the gills huge and vulnerable, along with their throat. Not to mention their snout and eyes.

A Constable unholstered her own hotshot, and fixed it on the young man. "Stand down, Officer. Remember the treaty…" Then, in a quieter voice. "*This isn't the place*."

The young officer braced his hand on the trigger, and the Constable opened fire from the crowd.

The single, red beam from her gun struck the young man, but his suit seemed to absorb the hit, the heat.

He didn't flinch, even as it ate through his abdomen and burst out of his other side.

"What the hell?" a second Constable steadied his gun at the young man, and opened fire.

More beams, still, joined the array of lasers. Dozens, creating their own miniature red giant in the center of the deck where their lasers impacted with the rogue officer.

Until his gold suit began to shimmer, than strip away in wisps of holographic light. Brilliant, deep yellow giving way to pale, muted lavender.

Their own pale skin tearing away in the onslaught, until a copper-scaled, eight-foot-tall Kaleidizen stood in the Constable's place. One that I was well acquainted with.

In the confusion, once the Translation Officer's easer failed, the lasers ceased.

Pool the Elder, however, didn't seem confused in the slightest. "You."

"Me," said Pool the Younger. They lowered the barrel, and squeezed the trigger.

Hot, blue light jetted out of the end of the gun. Blasting through Pool the Elder's violet spacesuit, through their scaled right shoulder. Clean through their bone, blackened, smoking marrow spraying out at us along with boiling, golden ichor. All the way through to the deck, melting wood upon steel upon iron. Cutting a chasm into the ship between Pool the Elder's body and Pool the Elder's right arm.

When they were done, panting and shivering, my Translations Officer stumbled aside. Tripping over the arm they'd severed.

Pool picked it up as two eyes opened above their blazing, orange six. All of them shifting to gold. As if asking to share the Elder's pain.

Pool the Elder didn't join them. Nor did they cry. Or bleed, much.

The wound was cauterized as it opened. It smoked, sure, and there were bare patches where their scales had been blasted away. But all six of their gills were intact. Trembling and flattened to their skull, yes, but not damaged.

Their spacesuit was torn, red embers flaking off of it, but Kaleidizens could breathe in space, anyway. Other than the arm, there was no harm done.

A grin bloomed on Pool's face as they surveyed their work, lowering the hotshot. The glowing red flecks of singed spacesuit reflecting in all six of their eyes, which flicked to the Secretary.

Pool's expression curdled over, and they raised the gun, again. This time, leveling it at Aries.

The deck erupted into movement–and noise, I knew–but my own heartbeat drowned out the cacophony. Furious, wet, hard, and fast in my ears. As if the blood was running over my eardrums instead of through the precious chamber within my chest.

Saliva pooled in my jaws, and my fists clenched–pale and trembling.

Anticipation.

There was no room in me to explore the emotion, it was just *there*. I *wanted* Aries' liquid emerald blood to flow–hot–across the decadent floors of the Intergalactic. To seep between the floorboards and mingle with the deep red pools in the ship's basement. To float off–droplets like tiny green planets–into the cold, black nothing, just as the original Grievers' had.

When the blue beam surged out of the hotshot, though, it jerked to the side.

The hot ray concentrated on the giant vase containing the Bird of Paradise. The glass first glowed red, then sagged. At once, it shattered.

The sound so sharp and near that the universe clapped into sound, for me, once more.

The gray shards rained down on me and Captain Crest. Large ones thunking off of my head with a dull pang. Smaller ones snagging in my eyelashes, gifting my eyes with a series of microtears upon every blink.

"AHHH!" Crest cried out, rubbing at her reddening eyes. "Damn it, Adams!"

"Adams?" I could hardly see, myself, but I forced my eyes open.

Aries was shielding his face from the glass shower, ducked down under the conference table.

The *other* Adams was struggling with Pool. Antiope's hands were closed around the end of the weapon, one side of her suit smoking and covered in soot.

"Let go!" Pool snarled, drawing their metal arm back. They slammed it into Antiope's cheek, raking the rusted hinges across her face so green-bleeding tears opened across her mouth.

"Don't just stand around!" Aries ordered from the mouth of the Defense Lounge. "*Arrest them!*"

At his orders, every Constable within a ten cometon radius raced to be the first to do so. Some producing their telekineticuffs, flinging them as they concentrated on the floating shackles. Most clattered to the deck, but one closed around Pool's ankle. Just one.

Some Constables hurled stunStones, white marbles rolling across the deck. Most crunched under the foot of their fellow officials, enveloping senators and councilors in holographic boxes at random.

As if on cue, two white flares flickered into existence. A cosmopod parked on the deck shaking off its cloaking as a blue Kaleidizen threw the hatch open.

"GET IN!" River roared.

Pool scrambled over the side of the vessel, falling inside as River revved the engine. The pod sputtered to life, swerving out of the way of a pair of Constables that had opened fire on it to slam into one of the metal poles on the deck.

Then the neck pole, and the next. Clearing five in a row, the metal rods falling over to expose the crackling wiring underneath.

A charge dropped from the atmosphere as the cosmopod swept out over the deck and away from the Intergalactic Space Station.

Only Aries Adams had the forethought to grab onto something. The Secretary of Space hugging one leg of the bolted-down wooden table as everyone else floated away. Including me.

The deck seemed to repel my boots as two like ends of a magnet do each other. Shoving me out into the black open.

Ant clasped my tail, yanking me hard and painfully so she could take my waist into her arms. Hugging me to her as she crouched, temporarily pulling me back to the ship, but she, too, was beginning to float away.

Gleaming green sheets of steel slid over our eyes as the Great Snake waded through the hovering bodies of a sea of screaming officials. Alighting in front of us, the hatch popping open.

Ush started up the ladder, then Crest, then Ant.

I was close behind her, stealing one last, long look back at the calamity aboard the Intergalactic.

By now, xenos in beige were deploying nets in order to draw the hundreds of spinning, space-bound Terrans back to the ship. But dozens were beyond reach, their shouts ebbing away like the roar of distant waves of planets unknown and unseen.

For these, dragoon ships were ejecting from underneath the vessel. Blue, gold, and red lights blaring.

I wondered as I slid into the hatch, and closed it, how much the scene resembled any of the hundreds of disasters aboard the Hera.

For more than a moment, just before the gap of the hatch shut, I considered grabbing collar of Ant’s spacesuit. My fingers tingled, aching to close around it. To fling her into the chaos she had wrought on the galaxy. Into the arms of the father she so sought to protect.

We watched through the windshield as the dragoons surged past the floating Terrans, far and out toward the ovular, green cosmopod. Twinkling in the distance.

SootFoot was at the steering wheel. Grinning, their black nose wet, nostrils flaring. “WOOO, what a rush! Sable, you were smart to activate Terrain Awareness, I’ve never had to avoid landing on a floating body before.” They addressed their Captain, now. “What did I miss?”

“EVERYTHING!” Crest didn’t miss a beat, wheeling on Ant. “You–You ruined everything! It could’ve ended just now!”

“What happened?” SootFoot’s grin thawed, their eyes narrowing.

Ant shrunk into the furthest corner of the craft, a blush so deep and red creeping into her complexion that her face may as well have been smeared in blood.

Crest shook her head with a growl even I doubted I could muster. “Nevermind,” she said, stabbing a finger at the winking cosmopod. “We need to head that craft off, *now*!”

“So catching up is the most important thing, right now, Captain?” SootFoot braced one hand on the wheel, the other on the aileron switch. Throwing it to one side. “Not safety?”

“Affirmative,” Crest hastened into a seat, though, and pulled the seatbelt across her waist.

We each followed suit–Cadbury already firmly strapped in where he clutched the sides of his seat at SootFoot’s side.

Though, I’d barely managed to buckle mine into place when the Great Snake reared back, whipping my neck over the top of the seat I was in.

The ship lurched forward at such a speed my seatbelt dug several centimeters into my flesh. Cutting me even through my spacesuit.

“My nose!” Crest deactivated her blood-splattered helmet to clutch her face. Blood streaming out of her nostrils, and the bridge of her nose jagged and crooked, like the bone was pressing out just under the skin.

"Sorry, Liv," SootFoot said, and their voice was sincere. But they didn't look away from the windshield. The dragoons gliding under us as we gained on the cosmopod.

Olivia stumbled out of her seat as the Great Snake slowed to a hover over the craft. "You did *perfect*," she leaned down for the pilot to kiss her lips, even through the gentle trickle of blood.

"Just wait til you see my haul," SootFoot jammed a hand into their pocket, and pulled out a long scroll of connected, small, square packets. "Check out the date: 2178."

"No way…" Crest popped one of the condoms off of the scroll and marvelled at the date on the back. "Unexpired."

"Unexpired?" I said, more to myself than anyone else. So that wasn't a production date, it was an expiration date. But for the end of quality or utility?

There was a twinge in my stomach as Crest and SootFoot came together again, with more hands and more tongue.

"What's the big deal with this ship, anyway?" Cad pointed down, as if to indicate the ship under the floor.

Ant struggled across the cabin, clasping the back of Cadbury's seat at the dashboard. "Pool's aboard and–"

"*BASTARD!*" Nelson bolted out of his seat and grabbed the steering wheel. Wrenching it to the side so the Great Snake dipped and scraped against the side of the pod.

I crossed the ship to steady the craft as SootFoot deepened their kiss with Captain Crest. I knew all too well they were savoring the taste of the blood, but Crest didn't seem to mind. Seemed to *enjoy* the slow, slimy, sensual licks SootFoot was giving her face. Returned the favor with licks of her own.

"Our crew's a mess," said Ush, "but at least we don't lick each other in public."

"It's their ship," I reminded her, climbing the rungs to the hatch as I activated my helmet. "Pool's bound to know where we can find our own. Wait here! Nelson, no more ramming!"

"I'll do it again if you don't come back soon enough!" Cad promised.

"Then I'll hurry," I said, unlatching the hatch.

I paused as my arm tugged down, despite the air sucking everything upward. Like an individual gravity, centered entirely on me and– "Ant." I looked down at her face.

Her fists, clenching the rungs below me, were as red as her face. "Jean–"

My arm bolted out faster than any synapse could lash an electric charge. "*Let me go*!"

She stumbled as she landed in the cabin of the Great Snake. Her eyes as big and bright as the ship itself, and twice as transparent. "I'm sorry…"

I turned my back on her, hoisting myself up and out of the ship.

Red lasers deflected off of my helmet as I sprang back up. I hugged the side of the ship, slamming the hatch shut.

There were easily a half dozen dragoons closing in behind us, lights flashing, goldsuits hanging out of the hatches to aim hotshots, or attempt to.

I waited until their guns had overheated, jamming for a few axons, before I let go of the rungs.

The cosmopod was still twelve cometons below me, enough space for me to brace myself for a hard landing. But I smacked into the empty space just two cometons into my fall.

My ribs crying out, and my helmet ringing against the space like it had struck metal.

"Oh, fuck me!" I groaned. I held my ribs as I crawled across the cloaked surface, my fingers closing around a lever that was flaking with rust even as it was invisible. Well, that took care of the mystery of where the Kylix was located.

I heaved the lever down, and the hatch at the top of my ship popped open.

I closed it behind me as I climbed down into the Kylix.

The bottom of the cabin was littered in loose scales, empty beer cans, and several memories that seemed very long ago, now. Shit, now that I thought of it, we never *had* delivered that six-pack to the Henrietta Halo.

I opened the panel acting as the door to the tiny storage compartment between the pilot's seat and the First Mate's seat.

As I suspected, the cooler hadn't been maintained properly. Water, rather than ice, was present at the bottom of the metal basin, and there was a crunching sound in the corner that I thought, at first, must be six-packs shifted sideways, crushing each other under the weight.

I was met with the sight of Tendon, hackles flared and feathers splayed, his long jaws closing around a full can of beer, loosed from its packaging.

"No!" I snatched it out of his mouth. "Crowcats can't have beer! People only!"

Tendon hissed, drawing into the corner as his pupils drew to vertical slits. Literally narrowing his eyes at me.

He crept closer, whiskers twitching as he nosed at my belly. "More! Inside more?"

"Do I look like I'm wearing a labcoat?" I swatted at his nose, and he sneezed. "Sorry," I reached out to him, my palm open. He pressed the end of his snout into my hand, so I rubbed his chin for a second. "It's just that I'm *not* Ush, okay? I don't have treats, I'm sorry we haven't been around much, but *jeez*. Aren't you things supposed to be smart?"

As if in response, Tendon reared back, then sprang onto my shoulder. Using my head as leverage to crawl out of the storage department and into the main cabin.

"Little parasite," I cracked open the beer he'd been trying to devour can-and-all. It was one of the original Onion variety ales. Another taste of nostalgia, for the wash.

I kept the beer steady with one hand while I felt around the far, cluttered end of the cooler for the hatch I knew to be there. Pulled the small lever that opened a hatch straight down into the cosmopod coupled beneath my ship.

"Keys," I leapt down into the shallow cockpit.

River was behind the steering wheel, Pool to their back. A holster around their waist, and a gleaming, Kaleidizen-manufactured hotshot on their hip.

Pool sneered down at me, lip curled back to bare their three rows of fangs. All six pupils taking their sweet time to drink me in. From my impact-rattled head, to my boots, splattered in Pool the Elder's congealing ichor. "I'll give you the key," they rooted around in their pocket. Producing it with a flourish, tossing it with such force I had to jump to intercept them in the air. "Now leave us."

"Keep in mind," River spoke as they executed as skilled barrel-roll. "Once you uncouple, your ship will lose the bi-vessel cloakage I've extended to it. You'll be exposed."

"Speaking of which, why *are* you out in the open?" I hadn't noticed til now that River wasn't using any evasive manuevers, just the odd superficial escape roll when a dragoon cut it a bit too close, nearly ramming the bumper.

River said, "Drip and Pond are waiting, with *wusheram*–uh, *guns*."

"I see," I said, and I did. It was a trap, they were leading these agents to their deaths. Or, at least, to a hell of a fight.

"Don't bother trying to stop us," Pool spat.

"Lying down with a dog doesn't mean I won't wake up a locustrat." At the moment, I didn't care if they told Ant what I'd said. "It's a good plan, but it'll bring the power of the Colonies down on *two Kaleids*. Six dragoons is too much for even a hundred humans."

River huffed, "They're aware of the risk they've taken on. We all are."

"Yeah, well," I gripped the black, metal key so hard it cut into my palm. Red, hot blood squishing out of my fist. "I won't let you risk yourselves, have you thought of that? I don't *like* Drip or Pond, or *you*, River, or even Pool, right now. But there's only a few Kaleidizen settlements. There's *thousands* of human ones. If you two are dead-set on martyring yourselves, too bad. I'm leading them off your trail, and you're calling the rest of your people so we can talk this out like a crew. Like a *family!*"

I didn't wait for either of them to reply, my blood was thrumming too loudly in my ears for me to hear anything, anyway.

My next movements were quick and mechanical: Back up the hatch, through the cooler, into the pilot's seat.

I got a tight grip on the steering wheel, and took a breath that seemed to last decades.

When that lifetime was over, I yanked the release lever embedded in the central pedestal beside me, and uncoupled from the cosmopod below.

In the rear video feed, one of four screens in the dashboard before me, the dragoon directly behind me stuttered to a stop. The gunman hanging out of the hatch pausing fire to gape at the massive wreck of a ship rising out of thin air.

The ship behind that ship slammed into it, full force. Sending *that* gunperson flailing and floating off into the great, wide nothingness.

Nobody attempted a rescue.

The four remaining dragoons swerved out of the way of the first to encircle me.

I had to spin my seat away from the windshield for a moment. The lights: Piercing blue, stabbing red, burning gold.

The Great Snake slithered over me, following the cosmopod in a parallel line. Both speeding off as the Constables admired their catch.

XG-J 2151.

Justice for some Kaleidizen elder versus millions of dollars reward, and Aries' highest personal honors.

Yeah, I'd chase me, too.

I opened the compartment under the steering wheel, the shelf with the sole ceramic bowl the crew shared, and the Great Griever grinning back from it. "I fail to see the humor in this," I gave my seatbelt one last yank to make sure I was strapped in, "but I trust you know the punchline." I guided the stick shift into the steepest bank, ailerons on either stubby wing of the freighter shifting to one side like dropping jaws. "And it's *really* funny."

The Kylix dove beneath the ring of dragoons, passing beneath one so closely the two ships scraped together with a hellish screech.

My ears flattened to my skull, a dull pain germinating in my right one, nearest to the impact. I couldn't afford to clap my hands over them, to let go of the wheel.

The great, metal scream dragged against my eardrums for several long seconds before the Kylix was free. And, by then, I only hoped the person in the dragoon was hurting as much as me.

Just then, with every flashing Terrex ship to my back, gazing out the windshield at the expanse of black, I thought back to Stellar Fellow, quiet and calm in his pen with the track

spread out before him. The galaxy was mine as surely as that race would have been his. I just had to take it before they blew my legs off, too.

I placed my hand into the control panel to my right. Slid the smooth, notched levers labelled *L Engine* and *R Engine* forward. Laced my index finger through a circular tab above the two levers and pulled. Red letters sprang into existence under the pull-tab: *THRUST REVERSED*.

Usually, this would be a slip of the hand, or a trick I saved for parking in tight spots.

I threw the stickshift into Take Off.

The Kylix rolled over itself in the effort of reversing, but settled smoothly when it did. My windshield facing the dragoons, now. Pilots hardly visible behind the tinted windows, Constables very visible still hanging out of their hatches. Aiming for me, for the windshield, for the Kylix. But where the Kylix was located was changing all the time. Even given the glare and distance, I could make out their pupils bouncing up and down, left then right. As if I were being pulled backward by a towpod, with nothing but the screen in front of me to gauge whether I was about to slam into a meteor or not, I swerved in reverse.

The dragoon to the left of the nearest one was the first to take the bait. The green, angular dragoon jetting into no-mans-land between us, and rolling into formation to engage me in the scissors manuever.

The both of us nearly parallel where we weaved in and out of each other. Threading like strands of DNA. Cutting it close, wings kissing. Windshields glancing off each other. The pilot's eyes as human as their Captain's, but as greedy and piggish as the pink snout protruding from their face.

The Constable grappling with my hatch at close range. Firing at the bolts.

The bastard was trying to compromise my vacuum, asphixiate me.

And here I thought I'd be worth more alive. I guess that was just wishful thinking.

I rolled upon the next cross of the helix so the dragoon barreled past me, overshooting and exposing themself.

Luckily for them, I didn't have a crewmate to aim arms out the hatch. Unluckily for them, their fleet did.

The lagging head dragoon completing an impressively precise half cuban eight. Surging forward, then into a raindro-shaped loop, ending the manuever with a sudden turn toward me to finish off the shape.

Hotshot blasting with no hesitation.

The wannabe-break-in Constable was bored wth holes.

Their body floated out of the hatch, but remained attached with a thick gold line–like an umbilical cord–running from their suit's navel to the inside of the green dragoon they were floating from.

One of their crewmates, perhaps the doctor, severed the line with a swift swing of a knife that flashed in the windshield of their ship.

Now, they were just debris. One less person to split the reward with.

The pilot that had executed the half-eight–as well as the Constable–proved more than a one-trick equinid. Utilizing every ion in their fuel tank to box me. The diamond loop. Heading me off at my every escape attempt. Clockwise, with four angles, and four sides. To the left, to the left, to the left.

When I tried to go right, the nose of the Kylix rammed the dragoon. Still, they didn't stop. In fact, they closed in. Made the diamond smaller, tightened my leash, shrunk my cage.

It was some kind of trap. Even if we weren't sharing channels, they were, and they were coordinating. It this was the suspension, the attack was around the corner.

Literally.

The memory of SootFoot back in the bowels of the Intergalactic bounded into my mind. A phantom shiver running up my spine as I recalled how they'd stroked my tail, clasping it as a human would anothers' hand. "*Remember what you are out there. To them. A savage. An animal*."

Right, Great Griever it was so obvious. They had their coordination, their official manuevers. And I had the *advantage* to be off the grid. If I wasn't off the radar, I could *at least* be unpredictable. There was no reason to follow their rules.

No more action, reaction. Reply, rebuttal. I wasn't just a pilot, I was the *Captain*.

It was about time I started acting like it.

So I cut loose.

Jerking the steering wheel to one side, and roughly. The rusted silver beam attaching it to the control panel giving a shrill groan as the pedals at my feet barked for attention with the quick retraction of my foot.

The Kylix didn't drift, it lurched as the nose rotated above me. Together, we sank.

They'd boxed me in, all right, but they hadn't cubed me.

The golden bellies of the green dragoons broke formation as they scrambled to get ahold of me. To the left, right, side, back. Back, side, left, left. Left, down, up. Up, down. Metal screaming, Consuls jeering. Wing over wing, windshield against windshield.

There were near misses, sure, but more impacts.

No matter, I let them ping-pong me across the cosmos. It was the only benefit to flying a hunk of junk, it didn't matter if a few copper panels caved in. If a few steel ones went flying across space like intergalactic frisbees.

That, and they didn't exactly build cruisers like they built freighters.

While a crack didn't so much as crawl across my windshield after an onslaught of ramming, the remaining dragoons were beginning to resemble crushed cans of Kölsch.

After an especially vicious scraping–attempting to corral me into a march straight to a waiting compeer–one ship's emerald wingtip bent upward. Sending the entire ship spiraling upward as the cockpit flashed emergency red.

And then, after a tireless barrage in which they'd lost more allies than not. All of us panting, and pushing ourselves to the limit. A few cold corpses still bobbing in the distance. Glass hovering around us in hagged pieces like captured starshine. They retreated.

There were just two dragoons at that point, and each swung its tail-fin upward and back, jetting in the direction of the ravaged Intergalactic Space Station planetons to our back. As if a beacon had been thrown up, or a notice put out via radio.

Sure, I'd had them on the ropes, but two is still greater than one. I had no doubt in my mind that if the Colonies thought there was even a minute chance at slapping kineticuffs on the wrists of their most wanted fugitive, they'd take it, no matter the cost. Yet, within three axons, I was alone amongst the debris of our battle.

"What the fuck?" I said aloud, to the ghosts.

I'd be lying if I said my first emotion wasn't gripping offense. Here I was on, on a patchwork-platter, and the Colonies couldn't even bother to fight me til the bitter end.

I wheeled the Kylix around to face the racing ships, and raised my hand over the flight controls in the panel in front of me. Let my fingers hover over the speed lever, imagining how good it would feel to punch it. Thrust myself into a hypersonic tunnel of pursuit. Now, I was the dog, and they were the prey.

Here was my chance.

And I didn't take it.

I wasn't just a pilot, after all. I was the *Captain*. There was no time for petty role-reversals. It would feel sweet to gain on them, close the distance and ram the dragoons into each other. Watch them crunch, watch the crew bang their heads into the windshield. Bloodying the view.

But there was the more important matter of what the fuck was going on if not a fight to the death.

Still hovering in the same place, I took the wheel, and spun the Kylix in the opposite direction. Leaned over the dashboard as if to glare planetons ahead–through Open Space, through meteors and severed limbs and uncertainty. Straight through to my crew.

Now, I did punch it. Revenge stripping back from my mind in the top speeds like a shed coat. Baring the nausea inducing realization that they were never sent to kill me, just toy with me. Distract me. Because–like Ush throwing a treat into Tendon's cage to get him to run in, so she could shut the door behind him–I had fallen for some kind of trap.

The Medusa Moon was ignited like a miniature blue star. A ring of rubble–steel beams, entire charred walls dislodged from the collapsed dock lodges, cometcows drenched and gasping for breath–floated around the blazing body.

The scene was silent until I pierced through the wispy atmosphere of smoke. Then, sound crashed upon my ears like hammers.

"*MAMA!*" a Griever child with a fire-mottled hand clapped over a crack in her helmet fell into the black ash. She caught her breath, shoved to her feet, and toddled toward a wall of smoke to the far side of the Kylix.

Before she could run into it, a metal tube with jets blaring out the end pulled in front of her. It hovered over the ash, blowing up a new cloud of black. The windshield retracted, a woman in the cockpit churning a handle to lift it. "*Harriet! Oh Great Griever, I thought you–*"

The little girl struggled over the side of the escape pod. "*Where's Dad?*"

"*I don't know*."

The mother rolled the windshield down, and Harriet's cries were closed inside for just the both of them to hear. The escape pod turned upward, and bulleted out of the atmosphere. Turning to circle the moon and rocket into Morrow. Though, I wondered how soon it would be before the planet, too, was burning.

I eased the Kylix forward, but my slow speed wasn't needed. As I neared the center of town, a siren cut through the roar of collapsing structures. Despite my throbbing eardrums, I breathed a little easier. There had been time for an evacuation. Barely, but still.

There was a flutter in the smoke, and I slammed on the brakes.

A gaggle of goldsuits strode through the ruins of Medusa, clutching elongated hotshots. There was some kind of attachment on the shooting end, with a flared base. A flamethrower modification.

I accelerated.

The resulting blood splatter and crunching bone was music to my ears.

Soldiers took orders, though.

I had to find whoever remained.

As if summoned via psychic link, the visojecter chimed at the far end of the control panel.

It took me a moment to remember the turning notch in the center of the steering wheel. Usually, Cad would pick up the calls. It wasn't his voice that rained into the cabin.

"*Sable*," said Olivia Crest. "*Captain, where are you? We could really use your help*."

"Where's my crew?" My voice hitched, and I cleared it. "Cad? Ush? Pool? Antiope?"

"*Nelson's back on Morrow, he and Lugomir helped the disabled residents to their pods. Everyone else is with me. Well, everyone but Lynnie and Yilig. Lyn's the closest thing we have to a medic on the moon, there were some injured–too many injured. As for Yilig, he was the one who programmed the pods on such short notice. Most of them had wiped coordinates, some kind of remote cyber-attack.*"

"Great Griever," I opened the shelf under the steering wheel. Though, just now, the skeleton on the candle seemed to be grinning too widely. "Where are you located? I've taken out a small envoy, so the coast should be clear for a while."

"*Do you remember where the barn is?*" said Crest. "*We've encircled it, there's high-ranks inside.*"

"Perfect," I said. "So you've trapped them?"

"*Not exactly*," said Crest. "*They're not doing anything. SootFoot climbed up to the window, and reported back. It's two dragoons, a man and woman. The man is–appears to be–petting the remaining cometcows. The ones that were stabled when this all broke out, with*

*healing limbs or taking medication for minor infections. They fight when the grass gets hard too come by. As for the woman, she's just sitting on a bale of hay, and looking at her watch.*"

"Waiting," I translated.

But for what?

Despite the beating the old ship had taken, I wasn't willing to let it get towed. Cruising along the underside of a thick cloud of smoke to find a crumbled docklodge. Burnt to a crisp, with one wall leaned against a crooked girder.

I eased the Kylix into the gap, and shut off the engine. Activated my helmet

Seeing the outside made me wince as if I'd been slapped. The ship resembled a rotting, beached whale. The windshield was the only intact part, but this only gave the impression of a live animal all-too privy to its coming demise.

The innards were hardly insulated, anymore. A crack at the back of the vessel was about two collisions away from opening into a hole and sucking me into the void along with the rest of those goldsuitted bastards.

The outside was skinned, only jagged flakes of the outer layer clinging to the exposed, crooked, jet-melted ribs of my poor ship.

I patted an exposed beam. "I'll be back for you," I said. "You'll be looking as shitty as you did in no time."

I crept across a sea of black ash, waving smoke out of my way as if I were wading through a sea. Ears aching but still pricked for any sound, any footsteps.

The barn was the only structure that remained intact. Not so much as charred from an attempted burn. Gentle lowing echoing out of the seams of the huge, closed doors that Captain Olivia Crest knelt in front of. Her ear turned toward the narrow vertical crack.

She waved me over, motioning for me to get–and stay–low.

I did. Below the eye-level layer of smoke, some familiar faces gazed back at me.

Antiope was at Crest's side. On her other side, Pool nodded at me.

Next to Pool, River, Drip, and Pond. The vojiviq. So they *had* made it back to their hiding place. I made a mental note to scold them on their plan, but wondered if they'd even listen.

First Mate of the Great Snake Janelle was on Crest's other side. Along with SootFoot.

Then, there were a few unexpected faces. Verena, and her son Brook.

"What are the civilians doing here?" I whispered.

"She wouldn't leave," said Brook. "And I won't leave *her*."

"That's the least of our problems," said Crest. "My people can make their own decisions, but now *we* have to make a decision about *them*." She jerked her thumb back toward the barn doors.

"There's only one thing to do," I said, but I didn't look to Crest. My gaze sweeping out over the smoke-blurred landscape. Embers still riding the odd breeze across my eyes. In the distance, a collapsed building groaning as it sunk even lower. As if to falling to its knees and wailing. "Make them wish they'd never set foot on our–*your*–home."

The slip of the tongue hadn't been lost on Pool, though. They dusted off a thick layer of ash, and rose to their feet. "If they shoot first, I can recover," said the Translations Officer. "Let *me* enter first, Captain."

"We all will," said River.

"Speak for yourself," sneered Drip. "You know these bazovs, *I don't*."

"That *bazov*–" River pointed at me, "–is the only reason you're not fighting off half a dozen Colony ships."

"I was prepared to die," said Drip.

"I'm afraid now is the time to prepare to *live*, my friend," River helped their compeers to their feet.

"It's a good plan," said Pond. "They won't be expecting it."

"We don't know that," said Crest. "But it *is* good strategy." She turned to those of us who remained on the smoldering moon. "We don't know what to expect on the other side of these doors, but there's no one I'd rather get killed with than you all."

Verena swallowed hard and audibly, tears welling in her eyes as she grasped her son's hand. "Mommy loves you, Brook. You'll remember that, won't you? That Mommy loves you?"

"Mom…" Brook buried his face in his mom's neck. "I love you, too."

Janelle nodded at Crest. "Let's do this."

"Cautiously," said Ant. "Slowly."

"No, quickly," Crest drew her hotshot. The end of it trembled, flicking–just for a moment–upward, to aim at Ant's own head. "Why should we show grace to gold dogs?"

Pool's snout curled back to reveal their fangs. "We shouldn't," they snarled. "So if you don't know what side you're on, then give *me* your gun."

The vojiviq brigade and Janelle drew their hotshots. Ant did the same. "I know what side I'm on…" She stroked the barrel. "I just don't think we should make any rash decisions when we're under pressure, like this."

"You say rash," Crest cut in, "I say decisive." Now, Captain Crest outright shoved the butt of their gun into Ant's chest. Ant clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle the groan. "When

opportunity knocks, we answer. Got it?" Ant nodded, renewing her grip on her weapon with one hand, and reaching out to me with the other. "On three. Aim for the head, not the legs. We can't let them send out a beacon for back-up."

Even though, at the moment, it felt akin to plunging my hand into the garbage chute, I took Ant's hand. She squeezed it so tightly I thought my fingers might have to be amputated later. "I'm ready."

"One," said Pool, standing shoulder to shoulder with River, who stood with Drip, who stood with Pond. They stepped in front of us. A layer of protection in front of the door, the guns threaded through their arms so every trigger had a finger braced on it.

"Two," said Captain Crest. Behind them, Ant, Janelle, and Crest had their weapons aimed over the shoulders of the Kaleidizens in front of us.

"Three," Verena said, standing with Brook behind all of us.

Pool and Pond braced their hands on the doors, and gave them a heaving shove.

The wooden doors cracked against the walls of the barn, and a blaze of red and blue lasers surged across the hay and cow-shit littered floor.

The targets, however, dropped to the floor in a rush of gold fabric. This occurred at the same time as a liquidy rolling sound. Like marbles being dropped.

Sure enough, bright blue stunStones clattered to the floor, rolling between my legs.

I looked backward as Verena took a handful from her pocket and threw them at her neighbors.

Crest was neutralized first, then Janelle. Their screams choking off as holographic blue walls ate away at their faces.

These ones were fast-acting. Larger than usual, they seemed to take some effort to throw. Verena panted as she took aim at Pool and River.

River separated from the wall they'd formed long enough to miss the first barrage.

The stunStones collided with Pool, cracking like eggs upon impact. "No–Don't!" But it was far too late for any protest. The Translations Officer froze in place as a box engulfed them.

Drip and Pond turned their hotshots on Verena, but Brook broke away from his mother's side to grapple with them.

"Get out of the way, son," Verena threw three more as Brook held their guns down.

The lasers that erupted from the end only ate at the floor as all three froze in place. Brook, Drip, and Pond. Each glaring at Verena with the same amount of disgust.

I pushed Ant to the floor, and dove on top of her. She cried out, so I leaned up on my elbows. "Sorry."

"What the fuck is…?" Ant trailed off as Verena took aim at me, readying a handful of stunStones and lunging to throw them.

"Not them," said a voice that made my clit scramble into its hood.

"Not her," Ant grumbled under me. "Anyone else…"

Verena allowed us to get to our feet, so we could look at Artemis Adams head-on.

Aries' oldest daughter brushed hay from her unwrinkled, stainless golden suit as she sneered down at us. Murky green eyes flashing like steel plates. A hint of a smirk touching her firm, thin mouth. She tucked a stray strand of black hair back into her stubby ponytail, and I caught a glimpse of something new in her ensemble: A snug silver bracelet, with a flashing red dot embedded in it.

Apollo stood beside her. Nearly her height but more slight and–because of his big, pale eyes–seeming smaller, somehow. He had also gone through some changes. For one, when he clutched his hotshot, he didn't shiver.

I rolled onto my side to look back at Verena, but she paid me no mind when I said, "We trusted you."

"Well? I upheld my end of the deal," she said, motioning to the holographic cubes. Life-sized, three-dimensional portraits of fear, confusion, and hatred. "My son–Did you bring the acceptance letter?"

Artemis nodded at Apollo. "What'd I tell you, baby brother?"

He nodded back, levelling the hotshot at Verena and loosing a single, snipped jet of hot, red laser. "You can promise a Griever anything."

The laser wrapped around Verena's skull. Setting her hair, briefly, aflame. Smoke rising, the scent of cooked flesh spooking the few living cometcows into a lowing song.

Verena clutched at her melting face as her brain boiled out of the holes where her eyes had once been.

Her body seized, falling to its news as she jerked, blood spurting up her gullet. Black ash and pale yellow straw whisped up as she fell to her back on the barn floor.

Artemis sighed, long and lighthearted, as if she'd just taken a huge shit she'd been holding in for a long time. "Now that that's out of the way–"

I shoved away from Antiope, and aimed my horns at the elder Adams' chest.

She flung something across the floor.

It whipped past me, two cuffs chained together. Flashing red, like her bracelet.

I had only made it two cometons forward when the kineticuffs closed around my left wrist. *Tight*. So tightly, I cried out, and collapsed. "*GET THEM OFF!*"

The right cuff caught my wrist as I scrambled with the left one. Closed just as tightly, til I couldn't feel my hands. Nor my arms, with them wrenched behind my back.

I bucked, getting to my feet to surge again at Artemis.

She stretched her arm out in front of her, and waved the bracelet toward her. "If you want me so bad, then *come here*."

As if Artemis were yanking on invisible strings along my shoulders like a puppet, I jerked toward her. My legs dragging, feet twisting along the wooden planks of the floor in odd ways that I knew would leave me limping later.

A rasping bleat tore out of me as I bared my sabers to sink them right into her throat, but she had extended a fist to meet me. It made contact, square in my stomach.

Red and black sparks burst into view, the firework show of a beating I couldn't brace for.

Ant was screaming to my back, but her voice was a drone for several long seconds. Until the first fiery pangs receded, and I could make out her words. "...*GO! LET THEM GO! I'll KILL YOU! I'LL KILL YOU IF YOU TOUCH THEM AGAIN!*"

Heavy, rapid thudding noises followed–footsteps, deliberate and getting closer.

Artemis didn't so much as take a step backward, looking to Apollo, who'd been so silent I forgot he was even there. "You know what to do. Just like I said, she's been brainwashed by these bleeding hearts."

I mustered the curiosity to lift my head and look to Apollo Adams.

He wasn't raising his hotshot, a possibility I wouldn't put past either of them, at this point. Rather, he plucked his own pair of kineticuffs off of his belt.

Apollo looked down at them and sighed, closing his eyes to fling them across the barn at Antiope.

She groaned as they closed around her wrists–I presumed. I couldn't see her til he made the same reeling motion, and her own boots dragged along the barn floor. Hissing against the stray hay.

Apollo raised his arm in an open palm above his head, and Ant hiked into the air. Ten feet, as if she were standing on an invisible pedestal. Hovering in time with her brother's trembling fingers when he couldn't manage to still them. Her dark eyes cast down on me.

Ant strained at the cuffs behind her back, her cheeks reddening and sweat sheening her face. "I'll kill you both," she spoke through her teeth so the words came out as a growl. "If you lay a finger on them, I'll gut you, Artemis. *I'LL SLIT YOUR THROAT!*"

Even I flinched as she thrashed against her binds, snarling and biting at the air as if she had the sabers, not me.

Apollo clenched his hand into a fist, and Ant cried out. "Stop struggling!" His voice hitched, and he drew the back of his free arm across his eyes. This did nothing to stymie the flow of tears. "You think we *like* hurting you? Hunting you across space just to see you in pain?"

Ant went slack in the air and, for the first time, her eyes flicked away from me, to her brother. "Don't cry, Apollo," her voice was gentle, but hardened as she pressed on. "*Not until I cave your head in*."

Apollo stumbled backwards. "How can you–We're doing this to *cover your ass*."

"Don't," Artemis cut in.

"Wait," Ant addressed Artemis, now. "Dad doesn't know you're here?"

Artemis groaned, and cast her eyes to the barn floor for a few seconds before snapping them back up to meet her sister's. "I guess you'll put it together, eventually. Though we were planning on *eventual*–" She glared at Apollo, who shrunk away from her gaze. "No, Dad wanted us to let you go. They can only bleed us so many times, plus, he said, this would mean *she* might not be bled at all."Artemis cradled her stomach with her free hand and, for the first time, I noticed a slight bump there. Just barely protruding, but bigger than even just weeks ago. "But we couldn't just sit around and let you make the biggest mistake of your life. That's not what family does. Dad doesn't understand because he and Aunt Athena were never as close as us. But, no matter how you feel about me, I'm still your big sister, and that means I have to step up if you won't. You'll understand when you're older."

As she uttered her last syllable, Artemis drew back her fist, and plowed it into my gut.

The taste of iron exploded on my tongue, a bleat that choked off into pathetic–even to my own ears–bahhing followed.

Blood dribbled past my lips, splashing onto my lavender suit. It coasted along the canvas to stain my boots. Which were soon more red than black.

Artemis Adams beat me as if there were gold inside me, and she needed me to vomit it up. Well, there sure wasn't gold in the vomit that did erupt.

Brown swirls of bile and chunky remnants of vegetable soup splattered onto the barn floor. Specked with red, like scarlet glitter.

Again, and again, and again, and again. Again. Again. Again. Again. AgainAgainAgainAgain. Always in the stomach.

Fuck, at this point, I'd have paid *her* to punch me anywhere else. The head, the chest. At least, then, I could finally black out.

With my head unrattled, though, I could think.

If Artemis was willing to go behind her father's back just to pursue clobbering me, not killing me, there must be something inside me she wanted. Not gold, but maybe something just as precious.

How had she found us, anyway?

"DON'T KILL THEM!" Antiope's cries ripped through the thin layer of focus I could muster. "STOP! DON'T KILL THEM!"

I swallowed hard to keep the bread in my stomach, at least. I couldn't think on a totally empty stomach.

Ignoring the screaming pain radiating up from my abdomen to turn to Ant. Though I couldn't find the strength to raise my head, I did my best to seek her eyes with mine. When I spoke, my voice was garbled, wet mush. "*Okay…*" I managed, heaving between each syllable. "*It's okay…Just close your eyes…That's an order*."

"Okay, Jean…" She did, tears sliding down her face. "Okay, Captain…"

With Antiope, at last, looking away, I allowed myself to cry.

Stifling the sobs by clenching my teeth, so hard I heard a crack. Or maybe that was a rib.

The last time someone had fractured a rib on the Kylix, Ush had ordered them to let Tendon sit on their lap, purring. Something about vibrations stimulating bone repair, or growth, or something.

Thinking back to Tendon, I remembered how he'd dove for Ant's head. Yes, in the days before we knew how Artemis had closed in on us back on Callisto.

Matthew Boners had just been a scapegoat snitch, not a true one.

The same way Verena had only been a scapegoat snitch.

So, if the tracker in Antiope's head wasn't transmitting, anymore, how had Artemis closed in on Medusa?

"*Inside, more!*" Tendon had cried, nipping at Ant's head. The metal burrowed away within her brain. "*Me more!*"

The same way he'd clawed at my stomach. "*Inside, more!*"

The little parasite.

Parasite.

I thought back to the condoms SootFoot had brandished. "*2178! Unexpired!*"

2172, that had been the date on the ones me and Ant had used. Because we hadn't known any better, no one had told us.

It was illegal to tell us.

Despite the burning pain in my stomach, my head was beginning to hurt, as well.

*Pregnant,* my brain panged in time with my heartbeat. Maybe in time with the heartbeat of the thing hugging the tracker in my uterus. *I'm pregnant*.

But pregnancy required parents, and I couldn't think of Ant or I as…well, *that*.

It would've been prevented if it could have been. If we had known… No, this was the Colonies' baby. Aries' baby.

Maybe that's why he was so attached to it.

If Aries didn't know Artemis was beating the life out of whatever life I was harboring, then she'd have to leave me alive to keep him none the wiser.

Artemis motioned, and I slumped forward. My head thudding against the floor for her to spit in my face. "I was always told Xenos were strong and vicious, but you're a runt, aren't you, XG-J?" She panted, swaying in place.

"*Don't know…*" Hay touched my tongue when I spoke against the floorboards, my side screeching in agony. "*I sure wore you out…*"

Artemis snapped to attention, kneeling with one leg planted on the barn floor, and the other knee pressing against my neck. This eliminated the ability to speak, to breathe. "You think you're such a smart-ass, but you're just a failure, *XG-J*." Bubbles crawled out of my lungs, materializing on the roof of my mouth. Popping as Artemis pressed down harder. "Think about it, if you're able to. Your friends are just Grievers, but you've been given *everything*. Free flight lessons, free lodging–*government sponsorship*. You had everything going for you, even your DNA was picked out for you. The Colonies *catered to you*, and you couldn't even get your license. A placement on a ship, a *salary*. Most pilots make a hundred-thousand dollars every year, not drok. *Dollars*. You can spend it *on Earth*." A hissing sound like air being sucked out of an unpressurized craft cabin eeked out of my nose, and black clouded in around the edges of my vision.

*I can't breathe*, I wanted to say it, but there was no way to. The only thing that came out was a dry gurgle. *Please, I can't breathe*.

Artemis' face melted before my eyes. Her skin and eyes swimming, leaving an image that was more like a naked skeleton.

*The Great Griever*.

Yes, she lifted her scales in one hand.

In the other, she lifted a blazing, red sun.

The warmth of it jolted me back to the barn floor.

Artemis was letting up on my neck, but only slightly, at first. "You're not even worth the paperwork," she said. "You're not worth the resources it took to put you through Scout School.

You're not worth sharing my genes. You're not an Adams, you're not an animal, you're not even a *human*. You're *nothing* but a waste of space." She shoved to her feet. I gasped as if I had scrambled into a proper airlock after a closecall with the cosmos and a faulty tether. "This is taking too long."

"Maybe it's a sign," Apollo suggested.

"A sign I need to use more force, maybe," said Artemis. She reared her leg back. Her arms flexed and I jerked out of the way. That invisible hand clasped around my shoulders directing me like a puppet.

Artemis unlatched the flashing bracelet, and I dropped like a doll back to the floor.

She leveled her leg at my stomach. "This should do it." Now, she swung that boot at my body.

With my invisible shackles off, even if my real shackles were still on, I could roll out–if it weren't for the blazing pain radiating over my entire being.

Rolling was out of the question, that would just irritate my ribs.

As the toe of her boot neared me, I considered it.

Backing away wouldn't work, but if I could get closer.

I lunged as the toe of her boot brushed my stomach. Latching my sabers around her ankle, and biting down for all I was worth.

Dark green amulius spurted out of Artemis' torn ligature as if from a hose.

It tasted much like blood, but it was less watery.

A viscous, syrupy, deep green fountain, funneling into a small pond on the barn floor. Seeping between the wooden floorboards. Creeping out toward the stables for the cometcalves to lap at, though they cringed at the taste.

"NO!" Apollo lowered his arm too fast, and Antiope slammed into the floor.

Her brother paid her no mind, collapsing to his hands and knees as Artemis, herself, folded in half, then completely.

At first, she clutched at her ankle. The amulius ran through her fingers, though. I'd torn some kind of central vein, it was flowing too quickly for anyone to stop.

Apollo tried, whipping out his hotshot and shifting the barrel a few notches with a clicking noise. In a different mode, now, he aimed it at Artemis' deep, wide wound.

The laser he emitted was flat, red, thin as a pencil, and didn't singe Artemis. Instead, sealing the wound with a wet, sizzling slurping sound. Cauterizing.

The Colonies really had thought of everything.

It was too late for that, though. Artemis' breath was shallow, her chest barely rising. Though she'd been pale before, now she was white as the nutrient-leeched dust from most moons. There was no pink blush to her cheeks. Even her green eyes seemed to be growing paler, translucent like painted glass.

Her voice was soft and gentle when she managed to speek. Apollo crawling to her side to clutch her hand. "*Don't worry, little brother…*"

Still bound, Antiope rolled across the barn floor. Using her chin to dictate the direction. Not toward her dying sister, but toward me.

I cried out as she nudged my side, but Apollo didn't look away from Artemis.

Artemis squeezed his hand. "*Don't worry, and don't blame* Deadname…*It's not his fault he's the weakest link…That's just nature, okay?*"

"Art?" Apollo shook her as her eyes shuttered. Without looking, she clasped his wrist, and squeezed the bracelet there. It popped off, but again, he didn't pay any attention. "Artemis, talk! You'll be okay!"

"*You can't fight nature…*" Artemis uttered, her mouth hardly moving. "*I don't want to fight, anymore….*"

My own cuffs popped open, and Artemis' chest never rose again.

Apollo's tears splashed over Artemis' suit. "Then I won't ask you to," he nodded, more to himself than her. "And I won't let them get away with this."

Antiope took me into her arms. My orders no longer applied, her eyes were open and searching my face. Dark and deep and lovely, even at a time like this, when they were bloodshot with panic. "Jean?"

"*I'm here…*" I managed, though it pained me just to speak.

"I'll take care of you," said Ant.

Apollo pushed away from the floor, and his sister's corpse. Turning his head to rain vomit onto the floorboards. Tears splashed into the ejection.

He turned to face Ant and I. His brow wasn't furrowed, and his mouth wasn't pressed. This wasn't an expression of anger, but a distant, cold one. Like that of someone watching a documentary, not surveying a sibling, or anything noteworthy at all. "You show more care to that *thing* than your own sister." He didn't shout, he didn't seem capable of it, just then. I wasn't sure if he'd be capable of it ever again. "You're sick, Ant."

Antiope jerked as if she'd been clapped on the back. "You know my name?" she said. "My *real* name?"

"I know a lot more than that," Apollo reached into his pocket, and pulled out a ring of keys. He clicked a button attached to the ring, and the far end of the barn shimmered. An emerald-shiny dragoon shifted into view.

Apollo stepped over Artemis' body to climb up the side of the ship. Though he hesitated as the hatch popped open. Sparing one last, long look back at the open barn.

The blue cubes to my back. Verena's body, her molten face. The cometcow mothers nursing their calves. Antiope laying over my body as if to shield it from an onslaught of lasers. Artemis, just cometons away from us. Her blood still so sticky wet, it would surely stain the wood green.

"God help you," he said, climbing into the ship. The hatch closed behind him.

The dragoon revved to life, headlights drowning us in white beams for a moment before the dragoon lurched toward the back wall of the barn.

As River had back at the Undergal, Apollo rammed straight through the structure.

Wooden beams crunched as the dragoon smashed through, splinters raining over Ant and I. Though they floated when the hole Apollo left was free from obstruction.

My helmet sprang over my face, and Antiope activated hers.

A great whooshing wind enveloped us, stirring the hay so streaks of gold flitted over my dimming vision.

The oxygen seal was broken, the only one besides the dining hall.

"*My pocket…*" I nodded down at my side, and Antiope reached in. She pulled out the black, metal key there. "*The Kylix…under a slant…in the rubble…*"

She closed her hand around the key, and nodded. Just once. "Yes, Captain," she said. "It'll take some time to load everyone on, but we'll be on Morrow in an auron or so." She

touched my side, just barely. Skating her gloved fingertips over the fabric of my suit. “Are you in much pain?”

“*Starshine*,” I grunted as she pressed a tender spot in my ribs, and withdrew her hand. “*You’ve got no idea*.”

Every nudge of the steering wheel sent a stabbing pain through my throat, into my stomach. It burned there, red-hot and throbbing in time with my slowing heartbeat.

I slumped over the wheel, savoring the cool touch of the windshield against my cheek.

“We’re close,” Ant assured me. “I can see it, I think.” She rubbed my back, and I didn’t have the heart to tell her this only put pressure on the pain. “I’m sorry I couldn’t–My training really is so narrow compared to yours.”

“It’s fine,” I slurred. She hadn’t been able to start the ship, nevermind pilot it just a planeton away to the orange wasteland the Medusans knew as Morrow.

As far as what she could see, I had to focus and stare so hard my head ached to make it out: The Great Snake. Green, gleaming, and only badly scratched where the Kylix had lost half its panelling in the propulsion.

It was parked in a narrow canyon, leeched of color and barren of any plants outside of a small, shrubby lot of a garden. This was beside an orange cavern, a squat building made of orange bricks like dried desert mud.

“Take the wheel,” I leaned away but kept my feet on the acceleration.

My head… My stomach… My chest… My groin…

“Jean?” She took the wheel, but didn’t look out at the canyon. Kept her eyes fixed on me. “What did–Did Artemis say something that–”

"Ant, pay attention!"

She looked back, swerving out of the way of a tall rockface to the left side of the canyon and guiding us into the center.

I eased us low, letting up on the acceleration. Reached over to the control panel, my fingers numb and crusted in blood when I deployed the docking wheels.

A screaming bleat tore out of me as the cabin rocked upon landing.

Blood dribbled out of the corner of my mouth. My tongue, my gums, my lungs– everything inside me flared to a pained and synchronized throb.

Even though it went against everything I'd been trained to do, I slammed down on the brakes.

The Kylix fish-tailed, the end swinging to one side, then the other. Tail scraping against the right-most rock-face. Nose crashing clean through a building that had POST OFFICE painted across the storefront. Great Griever, I hoped no one was inside. But I knew if they were, once they knew the circumstances, they'd understand.

Given the view up close, the circumstances were unmistakable for anyone on-planet.

In front of the brick cavern, at the end of the canyon, a shallow pit was growing deeper and wider with each heave of the shovel. Humans with their helmets down labored over the hole, while Kaleidizens and Octils carried burgundy-shrounded bundles to the grave. The *mass* grave.

The Kylix jerked to a stop beside the line of bodies they were returning to. Some as small as children, as babies.

"They never had a chance," Ant croaked. She swiped at her eyes, but her tears were coming too quickly for that. "No one deserves to have their life cut so short. *No one*."

"Yeah," my stomach panged and I hugged it. "No one."

To our backs, a sound like splashing water echoed throughout the cabin. Followed by rapid breathing, sobbing, cursing, and crying.

Our guests were emerging from their holographic enclosures, one-by-one, in the order they were stunned.

"...Where am–What happened–?" SootFoot stumbled across the floor, leaning into the shuttering wall as they coughed into the crook of their arm. "Fuck, I'm freezing."

When Pool's bubble burst, they collapsed, gills flexing and their eyes so wide their nose and mouth seemed non-existent. "Who died? Don't tell me no one, I know something happened."

River took the Translations Officer by the iron arm and helped them to their talons. "It was those humans."

Drip snorted, "It always is."

Pond said, "We were stupid to work with them. *Bazov* mistake."

Captain Crest shivered as they stepped toward the dashboard. Placed a hand on Antiope's shoulder. "I'm dreaming," said Crest. "I've always had such strange dreams since deserting."

Brook's eyes didn't leave the cabin floor. "It's no dream," he said. "My Mom…"

"Verena," Crest came to life with the reminder. Her hand closing hard around Ant's shoulder. Knuckles growing white. Her teeth clenching so hard an audible *CRACK* rang out across the cabin. "She betrayed me–and *YOU!*" Crest spat the shard of bloody bone onto the Kylix floor, but didn't even spare a glance toward the remains. Her eyes fixed on Antiope. "*YOU BETRAYED US, TOO!*"

"Liv," Ant piped up, jerking her shoulder out of Crest's grasp. "You're hurting me."

"Hurt," Crest repeated. "*HURT?*" Captain Crest reared her arm back, and slammed a fist into Antiope's chin. "I'll show you *hurt*!"

Ant didn't moved as Crest readied a second blow.

My horns slammed into the Captain's stomach before she could land it. Sending her stumbling backward into Janelle's arms.

Janelle cradled Crest. "Livie, it's okay…"

Crest bucked, shoving Janelle away with as much force as she could muster in her state. "Okay, Jan?" She thrust her hand out toward the windshield. "Does that *look* okay to you?"

"Liv–" SootFoot started.

"Stop," Captain Crest commanded. "This was on my watch," she said. "This is on *me*."

Janelle took a moment to collect herself, squaring her shoulders and marching across the floor to address her Captain. "So what if it is?" she said as a familiar face in a black labcoat emerged from the orange dwelling. Usher waved us in. "There's people in there that need you to act like you know what you're doing."

Crest's breath came fast and curt. "I can't face them." She turned away from the windshield, curling into a tight ball with her knees drawn up to her chin. Arms wrapped around herself. "Not after this, not *ever*."

Janelle pulled the lever releasing the exit hatch. Started up the metal rungs. "Take an auron to pull yourself together," her tone had softened a bit. Just a bit. "Eat, get some rest, do whatever you need to. But when you come out of this ship, I'll kill you if you let them see you cry."

"Kill me, now," Crest said.

Janelle lost her grip on the ladder, but regained it just as quickly. Heaving herself through the hatch, and leaving her Captain crying into her hands.

"Give her some space," SootFoot addressed the entire cabin, turning to the members of the Vojiviq. "*Please*."

"Of course," River said, nodding at the mass grave. "There's enough grief out there for all of us."

Drip and Pond climbed out of the Kylix, but River hesitated on the rungs. "Pool?"

Pool's eyes were fixed on the windshield. All six reflecting a different emotion as Cadbury bound out of the makeshift hospital. Hands shielding his eyes as he strained to gaze through the glass. "I'll hang back," said the Translations Officer. "I–I need some time, too."

"I see," River's tone was unreadable. "I–I hope you don't regret what we've done."

This, Pool did steal their eyes away from Nelson at. A faint smile touching their snout, and their eyes glinting gold. "I wouldn't give our time together back for the entire Andromeda."

Ant and I exchanged a long glance. Sheesh, it certainly didn't take a degree in Linguistics to know they weren't talking about Pool Senior.

At least someone had gotten any pleasure out of this clusterfuck of a wash.

River climbed out of the Kylix, leaving me, Ant, Crest, Brook, Pool, and SootFoot behind.

For several avins, there was nothing but the sound of the choking machinery, the stuttering whirs of an exhaust fan that would give out before the next flight.

Brook's sobs broke the quiet, SootFoot kneeling to allow the boy to blow his nose into their shoulder. "My mom's dead…" Brook moaned. "I'm–I'm an *orphan*."

"So am I," SootFoot reassured him. "You're in good company, don't worry. We'll take care of you."

"Take care of me?" Brook scoffed even through the snot and tears. He motioned to Crest in a wild flail that made SootFoot flinch. "You can't even take care of yourselves!"

SootFoot didn't argue with this.

Nor did Crest.

"You're getting older," Pool was the one who responded. "Your mother dug her own grave, now it's time for you to take care of yourself."

"*Pool!*" SootFoot said, but it was too late.

Brook scrambled up the metal rungs to the hatch, his sobs echoing throughout the craft even after he'd slipped out of sight.

SootFoot uttered a growl that sent the walls vibrating, taking Pool by the front of the suit and shoving them into the dashboard. "Are you *insane*? He's just lost his mother, he could kill himself!"

"He won't," said Pool. "There's hundreds of Kaleidizens waiting to embrace him if he just connects to the *keuleug*."

"He's not just a Kaleidizen!" SootFoot roared. "He's a child."

"He's a *weakling*," Pool spat. "There's a saying in my culture. Hard times make for hard eggs, soft times make for an easy meal."

SootFoot shook their head, but said nothing. Climbing up to the hatch, and out of the ship. "*BROOK! I'm here for you, if you want to talk!*"

The metallic thumping of steps receding to the faint hiss of SootFoot's paws through the orange sand. Out and away, til it was truly just me, Ant, the Translations Officer, and Captain

Crest. Though Crest was hardly present. Eyes glazed over and fresh vomit running down the front of her suit.

"Liv, can you stand?" I hooked a hand over one of her arms. Ant took the other. We bore most of her weight as she staggered to her feet. Led her to my module, practically lifting her into the shelf. An effort that awakened a pain like a burning poker being stabbed between my ribs.

When I doubled over, Antiope caught me. She addressed Crest, "Just close your eyes, get some rest. I'll check on you in an auron, okay?"

Captain Crest didn't respond.

At least I didn't have to worry she'd go through my things while I was gone, she was barely in any shape to go through her own thoughts, even.

Ant shut her inside. Despite myself, SootFoot's words had rattled up a new anxiety. And I wondered if, the next time I opened the rectangular hatch, Crest would be dead. Having chewed through her own wrists. Or stuffed the blanket so far into her gullet she'd suffocated. Or even banged her head in the wall enough times to knock the life out of her.

Then where would we all be?

What would it all be for?

Pool was back at the window when we emerged from the corridor.

Through the pain, I mustered my best commanding voice. "What the fuck did you do that for?" I didn't have to be more specific.

Pool scoffed, their gills flexing. "He got off easy," they said. "If I really wanted to make him toughen up I'd drag him into that grave, and make him climb out."

So that's what this was about.

I remembered Pool's story, the one about Pool the Elder's punishment.

"You can't take your problems with one Kaleidizen out on another," I said, maybe too quickly, flashing back to XG-L's face as they hovered over me. Drooling blood and liquified flesh, chewing my ear.

Their own blood rolling off of my horns.

"It's for his own good," said Pool, shrugging. Despite their words, it was a very human gesture. One of cold and easy dismissal. "My cymar had no right to take my arm–that's why I returned the favor–but they were right to warn me about this galaxy. For us, it'll always be an uphill climb. If we don't struggle, we'll stay in that hole you humans put us in."

"Fine," I said. "Maybe you're right. So, if you aren't ashamed of that, then what are you hiding from?"

The Translations Officer shuddered, their scales giving a glittering wave of anxiety across their entire body. They'd gotten so much taller and spikier, but this gesture seemed to belong more to a frightened hatchling than a mature Kaleidizen.

"I'm sorry," they said. "I can't remember–Everything's been so confusing, and crazy, I can't remember if I told you that."

Oh, right. In all the confusion, and betrayal–from Ant, from Verena–it *had* slipped my mind that my own crewmate had assaulted me. Had knocked me out. Hell, in some ways, had knocked some sense into me. "Forget about all that," I said. "I mean, don't do it again." We shared a chuckle at this. "But we're family, sometimes we're gonna hurt each other."

"That's the thing, Jean," said Pool, swiping at their eyes. "I don't want to hurt anyone. I don't think I can bear hurting him, again."

"That was an accident," Ant piped up, stroking the bruise blooming across her jaw.

"I didn't ask you," Pool snorted, nostrils flaring. "Jean, make her leave. I don't want to talk to someone that would protect a genocider."

My first impulse was to send Ant away, without question. I fantasized about pointing into the distance, and watching her slink away into it. Over and past the horizon, never to been seen again.

In some ways, that would be simpler. But simpler didn't mean for the best.

"Neither do I," I sounded each syllable out. Didn't want to look into Ant's eyes, but couldn't help but watch my own mouth move in them, watery and black as ink wells. She was hanging on my every word. "But I have to, because I love her. The same way I love you…The same way *you* love *Nelson*."

Pool shook their head, sneered. "I sent him into *cardiac arrest*, Jean!"

Ant cut in, "I wouldn't usually bring stuff like this up, but I've cut my lip on Jean's sabers. Nicked myself on their horns before. I don't blame them for it, and Cad wouldn't blame you."

Pool thumped the dashboard. "You cut yourself a little, that's not exactly the same calibre, *princess*!" Venom spittle sprayed across the cabin as they barked each word. Pool drew their scaled arm across their mouth, and wiped the ooze onto the front of their suit. "He already has Cyano, I could've killed him. I came so close to killing him!"

"Then focus on that *almost*," said Ant. "Pool, you can't go back in time. There's no re-dos. Believe me," she gazed out the misshapen window, out past the sky, as if seeking out a glimpse of the Intergal, "I'd do anything to go back and fix my mistakes. But you *can* promise to never lose control like that, again. You didn't mean to hurt him in the first place–"

"No, I meant to hurt the one person who ended up saving his life."

"Don't be so hard on yourself," I said. "It's going to take a long time for any of us to accept what Ush did." Hell, it would take ages for her to forgive *herself,* if she ever did. In fact, I wasn't sure she deserved any kind of forgiveness. It was only just then that I understood what her tattoo had been a list of: Names. Her patients, her victims. "What I mean is, she doesn't have the moral high-ground in this situation, either. At this point, I'm not sure who does."

"Cad peddled streaker for the most corrupt drug-lord in the galaxy," said Ant. Pool started to protest, but Ant pressed on. "Ush let a disease with no known treatment fester for months in her own patients." She hesitated. "I–I served with pride under the authority of a genocidal state, saved the life of someone who took billions…"

"I ran away from my role in an ethnic cleanse campaign," I added, more to take the heat off of Ant than anything. "As if that was enough, as if that was going to change anything but my own life." I heaved a long sigh. Breathe in: My years in school excelling at the flight simulator. Breathe out: My back against that orange outcropping, hiding as my peers slaughtered thousands. "Compared to the rest of us, Pool, your hands are relatively clean."

They shook their head, but managed a full-fanged grin. "I guess I never thought of it like that. Oh Eagre, we're one fucked up crew."

"Tell me about it," I groaned as I slipped an arm around them. "It's a good thing I'm not a real Captain." Hugged them to me, scales nice and cool on my feverish skin. "Just talk to him, Pool."

"I will," they said. "But–How will I explain–You know?"

"River," Ant supplied. "Well, that's up to you, but I'd just be honest."

I nodded. "Cad knew what he was getting into. You're not a human, you can't be held to human standards."

"Some humans don't even conform to human standards," said Ant. "They're more like Terrex standards. Just look at Crest and her crew."

"Yeah," I said. "They seem to be doing well."

"Sure," said Pool. "But so did we."

The smell inside the treatment ward was a one-to-one mix of septic and chemical. The pungent vapor of alcohol in heavy, constant use bringing tears to my eyes that wouldn't clear no matter how much I rubbed. Then there was the rot.

The ward was organized into three rows of cots with locked wheels underneath them. Not a single one had linen that remained white. Each was separated by a metal nightstand. On top of which rested a steel pan. Some filled with bloodied instruments, scalpels still tangled in strips of gray, green, or blackened flesh. Some filled with urine, others with…

Ant grabbed an empty one close to the entrance, and filled it with vomit.

An attendant in a white labcoat hustled the pan off to a spigot behind a tall desk. Rinsed it, dumped the contents into a bucket that was already half-full of somebody else's similar reaction.

He replaced it on the metal stand at the entrance. "In through your mouth," he advised through a pale blue paper mask. Though it covered his mouth and nose, he pinched the bridge of his nose to demonstrate the breathing technique.

Ant nodded. "Thank you."

He started to walk away, but she took him by the arm. "Yes?"

"It's my Captain–"

"No!" I batted away her grip, and he looked between us. "Sorry, I, uh, already have a doctor in mind."

He shrugged. "I see, I'm not a doctor, just an emergency medical tech. They may be able to better assist you. Let me know if you need anything."

He strode away to insert a straw into a Griever child's mouth.

Ant turned to me, "So what if he's not a doctor, he knows more than us. He could've inspected your ribs or something. Given you an IV drip. You need *fluids*, Jean."

"I'm fine," I lied. In reality, I was thinking back to something I'd heard about blood-draws. If he decided to have a look at my blood, to study it for signs of sepsis, there was a possibility he'd know. About the–I wasn't sure how to think about it. *The problem* felt more accurate than *the pregnancy*. "Let's just find Ush."

This was easier said than done.

Though the population of Medusa had paled in comparison to Morrow, the defenses that had arrived during the attack had suffered much in the same ways. Burns, and boiling flesh. This brought the total human victims to around fifty, with the remaining fifty beds occupied by the surviving xenogenes.

With it all laid out in front of me, I understood the grave outside belonged mostly to the xenos that didn't make it.

More than a few that sat upright on their cots cradled infants. Two cooing, one crawling, one still in its mother's arms.

Now, I understood why Nelson had chosen to wait for Pool by the entrance.

A Griever with a bandaged face and chest sprang out of his bed. Thrashing so his tray of urine spilled onto the dirt floor. "*Harriet!* Where's my daughter?"

A nurse eased him back into a seated position. “You’re not well, please lie back down and allow us to apply salve. It’s time to change your bandages.”

“The hell it is,” the man growled. “My family, I lost track of them.”

“All will be well when *you* are well,” said the nurse, producing a syringe of clear fluid from inside his labcoat. “Now will you be patient and lie down, or will I have to make you rest?”

This warning the man heeded. Groaning as he brought his legs back up to the coat, and stretched them out.

I had to look away when the nurse removed his bandage, exposing his singed and cracking face. The eye boiled out of the socket, a soup of red and white drooling past his nose.

Now, it was my turn to vomit. I held it in, though. Swallowed it back, conjuring a fresh pain in my stomach.

The ward bustled with med techs and nurses, but there were few doctors. Only three by my count. And only one in a black labcoat.

Ush had donned gloves, and dipped one finger into a tub of thick, green cream. “This may sting just a bit–”

A universal lie. The xeno child–no more than ten or so by the look of them, and the length of their tusks–winced as she applied the salve to their back.

The skin, there, was throbbing and raw, though that might’ve been from a recent scrubbing. They had countless slash marks from their shoulder to their hip, like cuts, or lashings. The remnants of some sick kind of punishment.

“All done,” Ush removed her glove, and tossed it into the nearest steel pan.

“Forever?” said the child.

"For now," said Ush, and I hated her honesty. She looked up at me and Ant, and smiled, just barely. "Captain, Princess."

"We need to talk," I said. "When do you think–I mean, I can see you're needed, here."

"Not quite," said the Doctor, rising and walking with us to the entrance. "Everyone that was going to die already has," she explained. "There's no suspense to everyone in here. They'll be in pain for weeks, and recovery for months. Mentally, recovery for *years*. But they'll pull through." She nodded back at the two doctors in the ward, a man in a white coat, and a woman. The man was older, with a gray beard and silver locks. The woman was in her thirties or forties. "Doctor Davis and Doctor Freeman are both very skilled, and they know many of these patients personally. I told them I'd help where and when I could, but they understood I have, well, *other* obligations, as well. To my crew."

"Family leave," I said, and she nodded, but cast her eyes down to the floor.

It took some effort to keep my head up, my eyes gliding over the scene like a ship over wreckage. Ush was right, everyone who was dying was dead, already. And there was a kind of peace to this. At least they could rest.

One corpse was so thoroughly roasted–skin crackled and blackened beyond recognition–that I struggled to place the face within my memory. The deep-set wrinkles, like canyons some ancient wildfire had eaten away at. A faint smile upon her lips.

"Assata," her name was a ghost on my lips. Needless to say, she didn't wake at my words. She would never wake again.

"She went easy," Ush assured me. "There's some things we don't know, but they *say* the pain from burns subsides when the entire skin is engulfed. The nerves, themselves, become so fried, there's no means to transmit pain to the brain. If that helps…"

"It does," I ventured to touch her zipper. It was molten and misshappen. The zig-zagged path to tug it down marred so it halted when I tried to lower it, but I only needed a bit of slack to see the silver string.

I pulled the rusted key loose from her cooked garments.

It was intact.

In fact, it was virtually untouched by the flames.

"Jean?" Ant reached for my hand, but I didn't clasp back. Instead, I reached for the key, and tugged.

The silver string strained against Assata's neck for just an instant before giving. Snapping loose in my palm.

"I'm okay," I tucked it into my pocket. Gave Assata's face one more look-over. It was true, she was at peace, but she hadn't died on Earth. *I was born on Earth, I'll die there*. There was a chasm of unfulfillment, as far as I was concerned. Dead or not, there was something *missing*. This key, it belonged to a door. The door, it belonged on Earth. Just as so many humans did, so many beings. "I'm fine."

I waved back at the doctors before we stepped outside. I'd have to make sure to visit sometime todrain. Human doctors would barely be a comfort to the xenos from under the Intergal.

Outside the ward, a smattering of relatives were puffing on streaksticks, not that anyone could fault them. Humans lit theirs off of xenos, xenos lit theirs off of Kaleids. One of which I recognized as Pond.

"Oy, the bazov brigade," they  nodded at us as we stepped into the orange-red light of the dying wash. Pond didn't turn away to exhale, blowing cloying, green smoke into our faces.

"What is it that Pool sees in you sweaty, fleshy things, anyway? A name and body like theirs, they could have anyone…and yet…" They jerked the streakstick toward the middle of the dirt road leading to the ward. At the Kylix.

The trunk had been pried open, copper and steel panels lying in an unorganized pile underneath a box of coated metal rods. One of which the First Mate picked up, and inserted into a metal claw attached to a whirring metal machine. Cadbury had a dark, reflective shield over his face, and didn't so much as flinch away from the hot, white sparks as he welded a patch over the skeleton of our ship.

When the electrode he held to the edge of the sheet of metal had melted down to a nub, he cast it aside, dropping it at his singed blue, boots as he selected another one. A teardrop joined the nub in the sand. Then another, rolling off of his boot, sending up a tiny tendril of steam.

"You wanna talk to him, or should I?" said Ant.

"Let him work," I said. "I think he needs time to himself, right now."

"Yes, Captain," Ant nodded.

"They've got a dining hall just up the road," said Ush. "If either of you are hungry."

"I'll check on Olivia," said Ant. "We'll get some food, and bring some back. That'll give Cad some time to himself, and you two time to talk about…well, whatever it is you need to talk about."

Guilt surged up from my navel at the same time that love fell away from my throat. The two feelings meeting in my chest and burning there, hot and unspeakable. After all my growling about dishonesty, Ant's lies through omission, here I was omitting something that felt much grander in scale than any Blunder.

"Antiope…" I managed, though my mind was so far off the sound surprised me, I hadn't even noticed my lips moving.

"It's fine," she was already striding off toward the Kylix. "Whenever you're ready, if you ever are." She paused mid-step to think a moment. "I know I must seem like a stranger after all the lies, and I know you hate me for steering you into all this. But I really only want you to be well."

"I will be," I said. "I think I will be, with Ush's help, anyway."

Ant nodded back at us, and came upon the Kylix. Exchanged a few short words with Cad I couldn't make out from beside the ward. Ush and I watched her climb up to the hatch, and didn't speak again until she had closed it behind herself.

"Captain," said the Doctor. "Shall I prep the lab for an exam. You've more bruises than not, and I don't like the way you keep hugging your ribs. I'm sure we could manage an X-ray if I just give the machine a crank and a kick."

"Forget about my ribs, there's something else." The only problem was, there was no way I would ever get these words out. Not if the Great Griever herself offered her hand to me in exchange for my darkest truth. "Do you remember that drain we got wasted in your lab? We were testing a new brew, I'd just added coffee beans to the mashing process–"

"And we ended up staying up late even though we had a drop at seven," Ush chuckled. "Sure, I'll never forget that hangover."

I nodded, but went on. Not because I needed to, but because I had to. "It was four o'auron, Cad and Pool were asleep, and I asked you to make me–"

"A promise," Usher supplied, nodding. "I'll just have to make some brisk alterations, but I've collected the equipment we'd need over the years. It's all in boxes, no one aboard has needed such a procedure, as of yet."

Right, and it was supposed to be such a simple procedure. If the Colonies had kept their hands out of this, out of me. "Well…The thing is…" My legs folded under me like liquified metal, and the mud ward melted into the ground as I struggled to catch my breath. It was running away from me, down the road, and boarding a ship with a destination I couldn't read. "The thing is…"

"Whatever it is," Ush jammed an arm under mine, and hefted me up, "you're not the only person that's gone through it." She took me by the shoulders, and turned me around to face her. "No more than Cad's the only human to love a Kaleidizen. No more than I'm the only Doctor to ever hurt more people than I've helped. So, if you need to cry, cry, then get over yourself."

So I buried my face in my friend's shoulder, and sobbed.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

There were only a handful of aftercare instructions: An ibuprofen every eight aurons for the moderate, occasional cramps. General alertness for any bleeding or fever–Some spotting or even menstrual-quantity bleeding wouldn't be so abnormal, but to excess or accompanied by a fever would be a sign of infection. Most importantly, decreased activity. "Bed rest," Ush reminded me more than once, "is the key to a speedy recovery."

"The Colonies know where we are," I sat up too quickly from the cot in Ush's lab, sending a pang through my abdomen. I hugged it, curling over. "*Aries* knows where we are. There's no resting for anyone that isn't injured, and I'm *not injured*. I'm fine!"

Ush carefully stowed their cleaned equipment, shutting and locking a metal cabinet I hadn't noticed before, embedded in the wall. "You *will be* fine," said the Doctor. "You're not injured, correct, but you *are* recovering. I don't suggest exerting yourself too much, Jean. That wouldn't be advisable after a typical procedure like this, but to be completely frank, I've never pulled two feet of wiring out of someone's uterus before. You may be more prone to bleeding, it'll take some time for your organs to shrink to usual size."

I heaved my legs over the side of the cot, found my lavender suit crumpled on the steel floor. "I've survived a mid-drain escape from Wolfthrop, *multiple ambushes*," I pulled my arms through the sleeves, thrust my legs through the bottom of the suit, "an encounter with the Streak King of Open Space, and a break-out aboard the Intergalactic itself. I can handle anything."

"You're Unhuman, Captain," said Ush. "Not *super*human."

She left it at that, and I hated her for it.

She'd offered to enlighten me on the disposal process, to let me inspect the crushed tracking device, the 'medical waste.' "*It can be therapuetic*," Ush had explained. "*For some, it helps them find closure*."

"*I don't need closure*," I'd said. "*It's out, case closed.*"

She was busying herself around the incinerator chute in her lab when I opened the door. The lights had been down in the corridor when we'd entered three aurons ago. Now, the path forward was bright and there wasn't a shadow in sight. Evidence of Cad's progress on the internal electric systems.

I walked forward, but my mind stayed behind. Lingered on Ush's words, just before the procedure. "*You know, Jean…I can tell from the ultrasound, I should be able to extract the tracker without harming the cells…You could go through with the, uh, affliction without compromising your position.*"

My knees buckled as if it had been replaced with jelly. Bone sliding past bone, sending me careening to the corridor floor.

On my hands and knees, I panted. My breath misting the steel below me. Blurring my reflection so my sabers and horns seemed especially large. Seemed to be all I was, all I ever would be.

A hand closed around my shoulder, and I had to squint as if through a deep drunken mirage to make out Antiope. "Jean?"

She slipped an arm under mine, hitching me by the armpit to drag me across the cockpit to my seat at the steering wheel. "Ant–What are you doing here?"

"Your food," she said. "I–I think you should eat." She produced a sealed silicone bag of chunky red liquid. "It's tomato soup. It should be plain enough to settle your stomach."

I took the baggie. “Why would my stomach need to settle?” I said. “I’m fine.”

She took the liberty of adjusting my hips to make sure my butt was firmly planted in my seat. Reached over my shoulder to snag the belt buckle, drawing it across my body, and clipping it around my hips. This level of babying was something I hadn’t experienced even in my youngest years. *Babying–Baby–*

My arms shoved out before I could think to restrain myself. “STOP!” She let my palms catch her by the throat. Let my fingers curl around her neck. My thumbs right at the gullet, just over the gentle pulse of her heart. The well of blood. “*I said*, I’M FINE!”

Antiope didn’t look to the floor, or the side. She met my gaze head-on. Though her eyes did lull to the sight of my bared, dripping sabers more than once. Her gaze was as steeley as Aries’, back on the Intergalactic. But, somehow, not nearly as cold. “Just let me take care of you,” she sounded each word out as carefully as one would in a language lesson video. “I might be kind of slow, Jay, but I’m not completely oblivious…I know I hurt you.” Her chest heaved, and she said, “I know you think of me as a traitor. My dad–*Aries*–I don’t know what came over me. It was like I was a puppet, and someone else was pulling the strings.”

I took in a breath that might as well have been solid ice–hard, heavy, and cold–withdrawing my hands. Right. Of course, this was about the situation on the Intergal. Because why would Ant think about the *thing*. She had no reason to, it didn’t affect her. Hadn’t *infected* her. Colonized *her* womb, shot out wires like roots and tried to sap everything I was worth to grow, feed off of me, take up so much of me that it was all anyone would notice. Not my position as Captain, but my pregnancy. “You don’t know *anything*!” I gripped the steering wheel. “Just chart a course. That’s all you’re good for!”

She winced, and dropped the bag of soup. It split open on the floor, chunks of green and beige vegetables riding a wave of red slurry.

Bile knocked at the back of my throat, but I didn't let it in. Leaning over to gag, but managing to swallow. Hard and painful.

Ant rubbed her neck as though I had strangled her. But did retreat to her seat. "Where were you thinking, Captain?"

"Why are you asking *me*!?" My voice was strange on my own ears. Harsh–much too harsh–and wavering. "You're the one that knows what's best for everyone, don't you?"

Ant slumped over the dashboard as she activated the visojector. One of her maps sprang into sight, that of *the* solar system. The textbook one, with the Earth, which may as well have been at the center. All the universe revolving around the Terrans and their busy, little, meaningless lives. In that order. Busy. Little. And meaningless. "I–I don't know *anything*, Captain," she said. "I get it, now. I'm not even *me*, I *am* the Colonies. I *am* my father. And I can't apologize enough for that, all I want to do is make it right."

"And how, Antiope, in your infinite wisdom, do you think you're going to do that?"

"I have a plan–*part of a plan*–" She rose form a slouch, to the posture of a consul at command. "If you would stop shouting and let me explain."

She was right. I hadn't noticed til then, but every time I drew in one of those gusty breaths to shout, there was a fresh wave of pain in my groin. Now, a dull throbbing sensation came to a slow boil between my legs. Just under my navel. The phantom of the parasite Ush had drawn out of me. Now, I doubted she'd gotten every metal tendril. If I'd ever be rid of this feeling. It took me a few moments to place it–*violation*.

"Go on, then," I waved, but didn't look at her. Slumping over the wheel to rest my forehead on the cool metal of the dashboard.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Her fingers found my neck. One hand at my nape, and the other stroking my horn.

I flinched, but didn't look up. "I'm fine."

"Do you want me to stop?"

This, I wasn't sure of. After everything, I knew I still loved her, though. For now, that would have to be enough. "No," I said. "I–I think I want you to hold me."

Ant stretched a leg out over me, and sat in my lap, right there in the pilot's seat. Her weight made my thighs cut into the edge of the chair, but at least that pain took my mind off of my belly. And there were other sensations to draw my mind further away.

Her lips at my throat. My jugular. Her teeth taking my skin in, and biting. This was a pain I savored, wanted more of.

My hands found her waist. Pulled her close so our suits all but peeled away on their own. My skin was feverish, but if it burned when our chests met, she said nothing of it.

Ant's mouth was hot and wet, her tongue teasing along the side of mine.

Now, pain wasn't the only feeling in my groin.

She pulled back, panting into my jugular. Licked the sweat from me before speaking. "Can I tell you something?" She didn't wait for me to respond, pulling up her legs to curl into a ball in my lap. Cradling me with one arm, and herself with the other. "I'm glad Artemis is dead."

"So am I," but that was a stupid response. Of course I was, my entire relationship with my sister-in-law had consisted entirely of being hunted down by her like prey. But there was a strange admiration for her inside me, too. In some ways, she would've been a more than worthy

successor to the Adams empire. Driven to the bloody end, focused, but also compassionate. Contradictions *were* something the Colonies specialized in. “She really did love you, Ant. I could see that in her, when I wasn’t looking at her boot, anyway.”

“And I loved her,” Ant swiped at her eyes. “I loved her, and I loved Apollo. But I don’t, anymore.”

“I wouldn’t ask that of you.”

“I’m not saying that for you,” she retreated to her own seat at the dashboard. Ducked underneath it to retrieve a silver suitcase that I only recognized in a vague way. As if from a dream.

Right, the watch on her wrist. The easer. This was CBI director Huber’s belongings. Had been. “What you did back on the Intergal was really stupid, by the way,” I said. “Not the–I mean, I’m not talking about the Aries thing. That was sprung on you, of course you acted by instinct. The same way I do when you’re in danger. But the thing in the basement.”

“You’ll be glad Olivia and I showed up when you see this,” She unlatched the suitcase. Inside, it was padded. With indents in the padding to cradle a silver thumbdrive, a thick folder, and medical instruments. One of the devices doctors use to listen to a patient’s heart, something that looked like a knife, and some kind of arm-cuff that I knew Ush used to measure blood pressure.

Ant picked up the drive, and inspected the dashboard until she found a port.

She inserted it, and activated the visojecter. Then, she removed the folder, and slung it at me.

I caught it, twisted too suddenly and sending a dull pang through my abdomen. Ush had said rest was the key to speedy and complete recovery, but there wasn't time for that, right now. I wasn't sure there ever would be, after everything.

"What am I supposed to be looking for," I opened it. It was a thick stack of papers, with typed lettering, and black-ink stamps in the corners of each page. *Henry Huber: For Official Use Only. Please return to the care of the Central Bureau of Inquiry*.

Every other page was blacked out, too. Thick bars of solid ink covering vast swathes of text. It all seemed to be the same continuous explanation of something.

I found a title on the first page. *Operation Sweet Tea*.

The little Ush in my head recoiled. Sweet was exactly how she despised her tea, not only because it was usually cold when served that way, but the sugar overwhelmed the natural leaf flavoring of the beverage.

I began to read:

*Due to sustained activist activity in the [REDACTED] there is approved action to sway views in the favor of Kaleidizens toward Terrex through a covert operation utilizing technology procured through special manuevering on the part of the Wolf Division.*

*This operation will require the utmost secrecy, and any correspondence pertaining to it shall always be in the possession of the Director. Under no circumstances should this case be spoken about, even to any actor's spouse, domestic partner, or children.*

*[REDACTED] Due to long-term monitoring of the weapons capabilities of the [REDACTED] we are confident that any retaliation will be dwarfed and extinguished immediately by the Hyena Division, who are charged with being positioned at the [REDACTED] to move in immediately and secure [REDACTED]*

"It's all blacked out," I waved the first page at Ant, "how the fuck am I supposed to know what they're talking about?"

"You're not," she didn't look at me, connecting the mouse to the console and furiously scrolling along the holographic map of some planet I didn't recognize for some time.

There were glowing gold dots on the map, some animated, moving into a tall rectangular structure. The structure collapsed as the gold dots exited out the other side, boarding angular ships.

Purple dots ran out of the structure.

The hologram blinked, and restarted. This was meant to be studied. One didn't need my experience being taught by Colony officials to know that.

"Operation Sweet Tea," Ant explained, "is a false flag attack. Do you know what that is?"

I shook my head. There had been nothing false about our lessons back on Serpentus. They were very direct, actually. Board, attack, disable, destroy. Fly, obey, apologize, submit. Kill, maim, detain, explain.

"It's what the Colonies do when they want to frame someone else–usually an extremist group–for something they put into motion," she said. "Usually it's just printing something off

and sending it to someone. Signing something like '*Love, Your Extremist Neighbor.*' But it all came together when we read that they weren't framing the Kaleidizens, this time."

"I can see that," I looked at the page again. This was some move to gain Kaleidizen favor. It did seem strange that Aries would associate with a member of the Eldeniv, Pool Senior, back on the Intergalactic. Then again, there was no way Aries knew that the Eldeniv were executing humans who so much as kissed Kaleidizens.

"So who do we know that don't have the means to fight back?"

"The means?" I said. "I don't know. The motivation, though? I'd say Octils. They're so committed to staying in the Colonies good graces, they don't even stand up for Kaleids."

"So what would make Terrans, orbitters, and Kaleids turn on the Octils?"

"Not much," I said. "For the Kaleids, at least. They're already chaffing with Octil leadership. And Terrans think they look grosser than Kaleids, even. You know, their tentacles?" Though I thought the appendages had a beautiful, plant-like appearance. Like slimey vines acting as facial hair. "Orbitters get along fine with them, though. I mean, you saw that one owns the Undergalactic. And they're fair traders. When they sell things, the price is usually a great bargain. They're generous, too. Some don't sell things at all, they give them away. Possessions don't mean a lot to them, even their own bodies can be reformed, that's why they usually win the most gold in the Galactic Olympics when they compete. They're willing to put the most effort and take the most risk in everything they do."

"Terrans never liked that," Ant said. "They've been fighting to disqualify them from some competitions. Wrestling, for one. Octils have the power to unseat the hierarchy, humans on top. It's demoralizing to lose to a squid."

"They don't like to be called that, but I know what you mean."

"Did you know Kaleidizens stole Easer tech capabilities from Terrans?" Ant said. "Most people think it's the other way around, because Kaleids use it more, but months after The Colonies stole hotshot tech, they retaliated. And it happened to work out best for them."

"I'm glad they did," I said. "Most Kaleids can't so much as buy ion-octane to fuel up with without humans snitching to the Colonies that they've been 'harrassed.'" I thought for a moment. "So that's how you and Olivia got easers? She stole them beforehand, right?"

"Sure, yes," Ant wasn't interested in this. "But, think: Why would the Colonies need everyone to turn on Octils? And how would they do it?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "I guess the whole Ammonia exchange doesn't benefit humans much. In fact, I guess it inconveniences them. Since Saturn has those rings, it would be a popular tourist spot, if not for the constant crystal collection ships the Octils are sending."

"Right, so we have nothing to lose, and they have everything to lose, and the loyalty of the Kaleidizens to gain."

"The Kaleidizens won't side with Terrex even if they cast the Octils in a bad light, and take the pressure off of them."

"They will if the Colonies replaces what they stole," this had been what Ant had been building up to the whole time. A part of me wished she would cut to the chase, but I also liked seeing her so intensely focused.

"Replace the Andromeda," I played along. "Yeah, right. How do you replace an entire galaxy?"

"With another one," said Ant. "The Caniscen. After being framed, Octils will be hunted for their sleight against Terrex. Round up, imprisoned, maybe even have the–you get it."

"The Xenos sicced on them," I finished her train of thought. She was right, this would be devastating. Octils weren't like Kaleids, they didn't have central leadership, not really. Just a few key speakers, athletes…Nothing comparable to an army. Changing bodies, forms, and identities didn't lend itself to war. The person who started the conflict would be obliterated, then replaced with another person who had no buy-in to whatever problem the last had been so worked up over. "But they can regenerate."

"Sure, but what if they went on existing, but in a form where they'd virtually disappear from view. All while the galaxy turned around them, burping up new stars, new nebulas, gas clouds and ice fields."

"How do you move an entire people into one place and revitalize a galaxy?"

"What's at the center of ours?"

"The Milky Way?" This I had to put some thought into. Most orbitters were stringently warned not to coast through the center of the galaxy. Because there was a supermassive black hole there. So famed, it even had a name: Sagittarius Astar.

It was rare for people to venture inside of it, and its pull was very localized. But the gas clouds around it glowed brighter than all of space. As if it were feeding them, somehow.

"Are you shitting me, right now?" I slumped back in my seat. "The Blunder…they don't mean for it *just* to eat the Caniscen, they mean for it to birth an entirely new galaxy."

"The Candromeda," Ant motioned to the stack of pages in my lap. "They didn't even bother to redact that part. Someone is proud of their handiwork."

"No," I said. "No, no. I mean–Why would they–Why not just replace the Andromeda, then? If they've tampered with the technology enough to be able to shit out entire galaxies, why not huck it into the big black space where the Andromeda used to be?"

"Because that wouldn't benefit the Colonies," said Ant. "They have more to gain by leaving that part empty. With the space to expand, the Milky Way is already leaking out into it. It's a spiral, I know you know that. But it also moves, it's living, with reaching arms: The Scutum-Centaurus, Perseus, Sagittarius, Norma, Far Kiloparsec, Near Kiloparsec, Orion–that's where Earth is located–then the Outer Arm. That's, uh, where you guys usually orbit."

"They're pushing Orbitters out of the Milky Way?"

"Othering you," she confirmed. "They don't even really have to try. The Outer Arm is, well, on the outside of the galaxy. If it reaches out for more space, and it already is, you'll all drift away from Earth, naturally. You'll still be attached, unless–"

"Unless someone saws off the arm," I thought about Pool. Wielding their hotshot and blasting clean through Pool Senior's limb. "Then where would we be? We'd be helpless."

"You'd need food, need clothes, need *water*," she nodded. "You'll have to participate in the Terrex economy, whether you want to or not. The undermarket crashes without access to the genuine market. If there's nothing to bootleg, you will simply go *without*."

"It'll be catastrophic," I said. "I mean, not worse than what happens to the Octilavians, but a slow death of starvation is–it's unmentionable!"

"Oh, they mention it," she nodded at the papers, again. "It's a brilliant idea, and they kill about a million birds with one stone. An economic plan, very little effort on their part, everything falls into place. The new arm, they've already named it: Prometheus. It's almost pornographic, really. Prometheus comes from an Earth religion, old-school. He was the first to bring fire to humans."

"As in," a boulder seemed to be forming on my shoulders, "if we don't fall in line, we'll be without fire. Humans in darkness, with no means to cook, see, or feel warmth."

"Exactly," Ant's black eyes were wide and bright. Conspiracy talk seemed to activate something in her. Something I had tried to stifle back on the Undergal. "And the timing is something I haven't even gotten into, yet. You know about Occupy Pluto, right?"

I groaned, "It's everything I've tried to keep crew away from, but, yes, I've heard of it. Watched videos of protesters getting tear-gassed, hosed, fighting off those trained dogs. The real dogs, not the ones in suits."

Despite everything, she chuckled to herself. "I knew what you meant," she said. "But, yes. Here's the thing. If they launch an attack by 'Octils' across space, all attention will be turned there. They can finally close in on the protesters and eliminate them, once and for all."

"How do you know they won't imprison them?"

"Would that be any better?"

I could not say. No one ever came back from the Correction Belt. Hell, no one even sent correspondence back from the Correction Belt. It was a dying, in itself. The Belt serving as a Black Hole that no scream could eke out of.

"Let me guess," I said. "It's in the papers."

"Not really," said Ant. "But if you read between the lines…Huber has been sending in the Fox Division for octavers. Young recruits, that and long-hairred hippie-looking ones."

"Hippie?"

"Ones that look like Cad," she explained. "My point is, they're sending in informants–spies that blend in and report back to Huber and his underlings. Or did, before, you know."

"Before you killed him," I said.

"They're ratcheting up to something *huge*, a massacre, if I had to guess," said Ant. "The false flag attack is set to occur just outside of Earth, on Mars. Pluto is at the very edge of our

solar system, it's not even a real planet according to most agencies. No one will care about a bunch of rabble-rousers far away, especially if, at the same instant, there's action right nextdoor. A terrorist attack beats out anything at People's Pipe in the news cycle, easily."

"You know that?"

"Well, it's just speculation," she admitted. "But if you right-click–*THERE*." She right-clicked, and clicked on a holographic pop-up leading to the source code for the image. She moved the mouse to hover over a line of numbers and files names. "You see that they used the physics of the Martian Consulate Complex for the collapse of the building."

"That's a smoking gun," I clapped a hand to my forehead. "Did you…figure all this out on your own?"

Ant shrugged, spinning in her seat to give me a sly, small smile. "Well, Crest is so out of it, understandably. And everyone is busying themselves with caring for the Medusa refugees, the injured, and the Morrow residents."

I nodded. Right. There hadn't been a single moment of downtime since we'd left the Intergalactic. "You've always been so clever."

"Not clever enough to figure out what's next," said Antiope. "Olivia needs time to heal, I know. But the redsuits always make a statement of their actions. Not a whisper, or a simple word, but, like, a *grand* gesture of a middle finger to the Colonies."

"I see," I said, gripping the steering wheel. If only to feel like I was doing something. "This is all going down soon, isn't it? Todrain, maybe?"

"Most likely," she said. "Terrans thrive on big news, it comes in waves, and everyone excites themself from the couch watching footage. They're already planted in front of their TVs

and phones because of the Intergalactic action. This would catch that wave and spin it into outrage."

My arms, stretched out in front of me, ached more than I could admit to Ush. There was only so much weakness a Captain could show at a time. It had to be one or the other. "One," I said aloud, "or the other." That's when it clicked into place, everything, all of it, at once.

Septurs ago, Ant had laid it all out. She really had been thinking it through, whether she knew it or no. *You're thinking of it as a weapon…But it's the most influential tool in the galaxy. That's better than destruction*.

It didn't have to be one or the other, it could be both. The Blunder could be our strength, as well as our downfall. And if it served as the latter instead of the former, it would be the downfall of us all.

Even Terrans weren't immune to spaghettification.

"Chart a course for Pluto."

Cadbury's head was far from in the game when we gathered everyone to explain the plan to them. In fact, according to Pool, it was "up his own ass" and had been for quite some time.

I couldn't quite catch every detail of the argument the time were ensnared in, what with all the insults, apologies, and defenses flying around the cabin–lubricated in tears, snot, venom, and some other liquids I'd rather not get into–but the gist of it had to do with the metal box on the dashboard.

It had an antennae, and a hollowed out circular slot with a grate over it. A speaker.

The Kaleidio.

"YOU WERE LISTENING TO ME FUCK RIVER THE WHOLE TIME?" Pool thundered, scales flaring so they appeared to grow larger as well as taller. "What the fuck is the matter with you?"

"What the fuck is the matter with *you*?" Though Cad's indignance wasn't very convincing. He didn't have a leg to stand on in this fight. I almost wanted to defend him, somehow, but even I knew what he'd done was indefensible. "We were together, Pool! Finally together! And how do you treat me? You bite me, poison my body, send me into cardiac arrest, then skip off into the stars to have sex with someone you barely know just because you both have scales! You don't think I'd grow scales for you, if I could?"

"Shut up, Nelson!" Pool barked. "Shut up, right now, or I'll bite you, again!"

River chuckled low under their breath. "Oh, I'd like to see that."

Lynnie, the Great Snake's Ecology Officer, leaned close to Janelle to mutter, "And I thought *we* had relationship issues."

We were in a squat building down the dirt road from the infirmary, constructed of red clay bricks that sprayed orange dust when I clapped both palms onto the long metal table we were gathered around. "That's enough, *all of you*."

Drip, Pond, and River sat beside each other on one side of the table. Along with some vogiviq compeers they'd summoned from various nearby moons. Five in total: Dribble, Lake, another Pond, Stream, and Puddle.

The Great Snake crew was there, of course. Lynnie, Janelle, Yilig, SootFoot, and Crest– the latter with her head in one hand and a streakstick in the other. Taking troublingly long drags as if she were dreading the next breath of fresh air, filling the room with heady green smoke upon each exhale.

Then, there was my crew, who I couldn't help but feel didn't quite measure up to our associates.

The Vogiviq and the Great Snake were freedom fighters, even Crest had managed to shake off her downward spiral long enough to attend. And here was my Translations Officer and my First Mate having a public couple's spat.

"Everyone listen, and listen closely," my hands formed fists to match my knotting stomach. "Verena was a patsy. That is…She's not the reason the Colonies found Medusa."

"Jean?" Ant, beside me, placed a cool hand on my forearm. This was something we hadn't talked about. She'd given the spiel about the documents, had passed them around for Janelle and Crest to analyze. To agree with her findings. But this was something that had to be pulled out of the shadows and put on display just like any other Colony secret.

"I am," I said.

Lynnie, still sporting dirt-encrusted gauze from our last encounter back in the barn, shot to their feet. "I knew it," they said. "You're a spy, aren't you? Everyone knows there's some reason Aries skirts around capturing you, because you're feeding him information."

Cad lunged across the table. Pool restrained him. "If you ever insult my Captain–!"

"Nelson, relax," I motioned for him to stand down, but he didn't. He remained standing, glaring at Lynnie until the Ecology Officer sat. "It's fine, I get it. If the Colonies are dogs, then xenos are their teeth. But, no, Lynnie, that's not what I mean." I stared at my reflection in the table. "The Colonies have gotten better than we thought at built-in micro-tracking technology. I won't get into it much, but there was something–something *in* Ant that passed to me. Like an infection. I caught it, and they've known our location since we first landed on your moon."

Crest brightened, this had been exactly what I'd been looking for. One man's misery was another's absolvation. "I didn't make a mistake."

"No," I said. "I did."

"None of us did," Ush cut in. "I mean, not in this instance, anyway. In other avenues…we've made many."

"Who hasn't?" Drip piped up. They folded their hands on the table. "It's been five yushes of this back and forth with Terrex, and we've won no ground."

"We've established multiple nesting grounds," Pond countered.

"And each time, they chase us out like locustrats," Dribble noted. "That's not progress, that's exhaustion."

"Progress *is* exhaustion," Crest said. "Believe me, humans are famous for taking three steps forward and three-thousand steps back."

"This is a waste of time," groaned Puddle. "I will admit, it was wrong to trust Huber, he did not tell us all the properties of the Blunder. We were working form a blueprint Terrans drew up, assuming it was the same weapon they deployed in the Andromeda."

"By which you mean," Cad said, "assuming they'd do the same thing they did to Kaleidizens, but to someone else this time?"

Puddle shrugged. "What is it you humans like to say? 'Misery loves company?' It's been grueling trying to plead our case to people who don't hurt the way we do."

Stream said, "Don't act as if you wouldn't bind the Secretary and condemn him to orbit just as he's done to you."

"I wouldn't bind and expel the Secretary," said Crest, shooting a look that could curdle milk at Antiope. "I would kill him."

"And he would deserve it," said Puddle. "But our regretful collaboration with the Colonies has ceased. Now, we should take the Blunder and reclaim the Andromeda for Kaleidizen civilization."

River spoke, at last. "No," they said.

"The Eldeniv would agree," said Puddle, venom coating their fangs. "I'm sure they'd like to be consulted about this."

"If you run to the Eldeniv," said River, "I'll run you through with lasers and wear your scales as a necklace."

Pool suppressed their inflating dewlap, shoving it back into their throat while Cad rolled his eyes. "I wasn't hatched in the Andromeda," said Pool. "I was hatched in the Milky Way."

"As was I," River smiled. "We will never recapture the incredible diversity, worth, and glory of our ancestral land. But we *can* make a home for ourselves here. We *deserve* a place for ourselves, and I'm willing to fight for that."

"Are you willing to die for it?" Stream challenged.

River didn't miss a beat, "For you, my friend, yes."

Stream seemed to deflate like a balloon, shrinking away from the table and drifting off toward some far-off corner of their mind. A hand storking their chin so intensely, scales flaked off onto the table. It seemed River wouldn't have to fight for that necklace.

"So that's it, then," said Janelle. "We don't have time to waste. I *personally* know fifteen protesters chained to the pipe at this very moment. That's not to mention the lives inside the Complex."

"All of this is based on a hunch, though, right," SootFoot said. "I mean, just to be completely transparent."

"It is," I said. "Partly."

"And why should we trust the Princess, anyway," Pool grumbled. "After everything, I mean…Lynnie, you were quick to accuse my Captain of being a spy, but we have evidence of sabotage already on hand for her majesty." The Translations Officers eyes bored a hole in the side of my face. "*Just to be transparent*, I mean."

"You don't have to trust me," Ant said. "My father will. That's why I'll be the one to kill him, when the time comes."

"Ant–" I said. "How do you know he'll even be there."

"He'll be there," she nodded once, to herself. "Just like at the obliteration of the Andromeda. My father prefers to witness his handiwork. Not to mention, word about Art would have gotten back to him, by now. He'll be close to Earth, for the funeral."

I understood, then. "He's waiting for you."

"Yes."

Crest sighed, and extinguished the spent streakstick. "He knows we're coming."

"Yes," said Ant.

More than one person said, "Then we shouldn't keep him waiting."

The main concern was who would travel with who. Roles dictated this: Defense, at the front of the assault. Offense, at the back. Then, there was the cloaked parasite ship. For once, this worm would be needling inself into the brain of the Colonies, mouth aimed at the brainstem. We wouldn't kill this beast todrain, but we could cripple it. Make it so it wouldn't feel an appetite, so it wouldn't feel compelled to eat. Starve it by starving itself.

The Kylix couldn't cloak on its own, so that took care of that. Offense.

The small fleet of cosmopods the vogiviq were piloting would act as defense.

That left the Great Snake as our cloaked ship. If Aries would be on Mars, that would be where Ant had to be.

That was to say, we would not be travelling together.

Right now, that didn't matter whatsoever. Our goodbyes weren't dramatic, there was nothing we hadn't said that we needed to. And I knew I'd see her again, this was nothing we hadn't faced together, already.

"I orbit you," I said. "Be safe, starshine."

"*You* be safe," she kissed my lips, then my forehead, then my horn. "I love you, Jay."

"That thing charged?" I nodded at her hotshot.

"Drip saw to it," she said. "They say humans have terrible aim, we'll need all the power we can muster."

"They're right," I said. "I love you."

She strode across the dirt road to the Great Snake, and shut herself inside.

The Kaleidizen brigade had taken a quick trip to a parasite graveyard, and scavenged rusted Galiton drives for Nelson to install on each participating vessel. With three times the power, we'd be in the Earth-centric solar system with five aurons. By the time we'd get there, we might have to plug our brains back in and reel our tongues off the floor, but we'd make it in time.

*Unless*.

This word plagued me. It wasn't *if* something went wrong, it was *when* and *what*.

"If it's not useful, we'll have to leave it behind," Crest instructed. She meant more than equipment or people.

Though equipment *was* something we'd have to think about coming back for later.

I'd gone with Pool to the brew room, and detached the keg we'd left boiling for septurs.

"We never did complete that order," they took a cup that Janelle had produced. Filled several, and we passed them around.

The stuff smelled rancid. Unlike a healthy batch, there was thick, congealed froth at the top of the cup. It wasn't golden like a lager, or crisp yellow like a perfect Kolsch. It was pissy brown-green. The urine of an unwell person. The yeast having eating so much of the stuff, and shat out alcohol, even it had poisoned itself.

A fruit fly had drowned itself in my cup, but not before hatching several maggots that swam in my glass, fat as tadpoles.

"Great Griever," I swore before I threw back the glass.

The beer struggled down my gullet, and kicked in my stomach as of the product of an advanced pregnancy. Just the sensation I'd been looking to avoid.

When I gagged, a bay leaf came up in my palm. Slimy, with a single maggot still feasting on it. "Pool, I'm going to be sick."

"Just something to brace the ole nerves," they skipped Cadbury, who chose to polish off a ginger beer. Lucky bastard.

"Fucking hell," Crest actually did vomit. "How do you sell this stuff?"

River swallowed four glasses, "Can I have the recipe?"

"You can have the keg," I insisted. "How am I drunk, already?"

"Are you?" said Pool, smacking their lips. "I'm barely tipsy." They were on their seventh glass.

Cadbury sidled up beside me, "Are you okay to drive?"

The nausea subsided as something else swelled in me. I'd never tell him, but this was probably the first time I ever felt *pride* in my First Mate. "I should be fine," I said. "You should focus on keeping the engines from overheating."

He nodded, and wandered between River and Pool, addressing the former. "I guess we'll see you after the attack?"

River's eyes flashed to Pool, but refocused on Cad. "I suppose I should apologize for that in advance."

"No," said Cad. "I should be the one apologizing." He dug his boots into the dirt. Made a little hill, then toppled it over. Smoothed it out. "I want you to know, I never listened while you were, uh, being intimate."

If River could've blushed, they would've. Instead, their scales flared. "I know," they said. "I don't know a lot about you, Nelson, but Pool's painted a very vivid picture. Clear enough that I know that's not you."

"I just want to apologize for being so–so–"

"Don't apologize for being human," said River. "That's what Pool loves about you."

"Well," Cad's throat worked for so much time I considered leaving him with the keg. "What they love about you, *I* love about you."

"Oh, *brother*," I whistled, and Ush strode to my side. "I get it, now, this is making me even more sick. Let's keep unloading."

We boarded the Kylix, and detached the loose, lonesome tubes this latest batch had been fed through. The cooler, any stray cutlery that could fly around while we rocketed to the solar system, even small, personal items like my harness, Ush's lab equipment, and the Cad's stray tools.

When Ush reached for my statue of the Great Griever, I stilled her hand. “We’ll need her, trust me.”

She shrugged. “What about–” She smacked her lap. “Come here, Ten-Ten!” She made kissy noises. “Come here, my little kitling!”

Tendon slithered out of her open sleep module, and down the corridor to her boots. Nipping at her pockets. “Inside more! Feed, eat, more!”

“Oh, right,” I chuckled, and reached out to smooth the crowcat’s downy head. “The little parasite.”

Ush fed him an ingot while I stroked his back. He was getting thicker, much more than usual. Cad had scrapped enough melted metal panels to keep him fed for septurs. “Can we bring him?”

Tendon cried out, doing a little jig. “Bring Ten! More Ten! Stay Inside!”

“Whoa,” I said. “Was that a real sentence, for once?”

“He’s learning,” Ush smiled down at Tendon.

“Learn more!” Ten crowed. “Feed more! Inside stay! Ush stay Ten!”

He really *was* talking, and asking to come with, in a clumsy kind of way.

“Ten stay,” I said. “Here stay! Eat more!”

Tendon’s head feathers smoothed to his skull. His eyes, usually beady and glassy, growing large and wet. “Stay?”

“It’s for your own good, Tendon,” Ush explained. “You’ll be good? Wait for us?”

“Wait,” Tendon squeaked, his tail curling between his legs.

Ush scooped him up, and cuddled him close. He tucked his snout under her chin and whimpered. “It’s okay, you big baby,” she soothed. “Actually, there’s a lot of kids, here, that I

think could use a visit from you." She smoothed his feathers, and kissed his head. "Think of it like one of our behaviorial experiments. I'll get data on what a good boy you are, okay?"

"Okay," said Tendon, his voice dull and crackling.

She carried him out while I toted a box of junk behind her. Including the crew bowl. Where we were going, cereal wouldn't be on the table.

Outside the Kylix, Cadbury had backed River to the patch-worked metal siding. And was taking their tongue into his mouth like there was some kind of life-saving salve at the back of their throat.

I rolled my eyes. "*Great Griever*…" Maybe the guy did have some kind of Kaleid fetish. Or maybe I was just jealous. If only all our problems could be solved with a kiss and a threesome.

Pool watched with all six eyes illuminated orange, and a swelling dewlap. When it fanned out, they stroked the delicate membranes. Fingers along the violet span like a god's delving into the cosmos to move around the stars. "Ooooh-ho-ho-ho…*Oh Nelson*…"

They took Nelson's mouth next, but Cad didn't release his grip on River's waist. River stroking their lips. "Is *that* what you humans mean by a kiss?"

Cad came up for air. "Sort of," they said. "That's more like *making out*, when you move your tongue around like that."

River cleared their throat, swiped the drool from their mouth. "Can you…show me again?"

"How about when we get back?" I suggested, rattling the box of items.

"Oh, right," Cad took it from me. "I'll just, uh, stow this in the grainery. It's nice and cool, there, so your candle shouldn't melt."

"We're taking the Griever statue!" I said. "When I'm dead, you can junk it, but while I breathe, she goes with us."

Now, it was his turn to roll his eyes. He went with Ush back toward town, and I nodded at Pool. "That didn't take long."

"Your First Mate is very persuasive," they said. "I think we'll get past this minor bump–" They stuffed their dewlap back into their throat, "–in the road."

I addressed River, "And what about you?"

River shivered as if a chill had swept over them, their scales dancing in the late wash light. "I, uh, look forward to learning more about your human traditions," they said. "I should be getting to my pod. We'll regroup here, yes?"

"If all goes well," I said.

They flashed a grin. "Eagre is with us," they said. "All will go well."

River and Pool nuzzled each other, scales rubbing and producing a tinkling kind of noise like chimes as they did. At last, they kissed, and separated. "I'll be with you, if you need me."

"I wouldn't want to distract you," said Pool. "We should all be present in what we do. You're clear on the plan?"

River held up the suitcase, and unlatched it.

For the last time, we all gazed at the blunder.

It was more active than last time, swirling, black, and pulsing with heat. Lashing out at us like solar flares. Despite the sweat apparating on my forehead, I moved closer. Lightning surged out of the center, stroking the walls of the glass enclosure like fingers beckoning for release. Urging me closer.

There it was, that song. High-pitched but not grating, tinged with laughter, like a child at play. The singing grew louder and more merry in my ears, beating on my brain like a drumstick.

I took the bottle into my hands. It burned–Griever, did it ever–but it also pleasured me.

The bottle vibrated, there was life inside of it. A new life for Grievus.

*Huh*. That was the first time I'd thought of our galaxy in such a way. But holding the future in my palms made it all seem so simple, and silly. I hadn't crushed any future towash, hadn't thrown it all into the incinerator like all medical waste. There was no waste whatsoever to our mission, now.

Aries wasn't in control of this kind of creation.

A tear I hadn't noticed trailing down my face splashed onto the bottle, and went up in smoke. There, evaporating, was Terrex. Another fell. There was Artemis Adams, and her vicious boot in my belly, her hate, her growling mouth, her seering eyes. One more. And there was Aries.

"Jean, your hands–" Pool took the bottle, and placed it back into it's foam-cushioned cage.

"What?" They were smoking, hardened, and hurting. "Oh, sorry. Good looking out."

"Are you ready?" said the Translations Officer. They touched my face, something I couldn't remember Pool doing before. Or maybe had forgotten.

"I am," I took their hand from my face, but held it. Kissed the back of it, one scale cutting my lip. "You're coming with us?"

"Of course, Captain," Pool smiled. "Let's show the Colonies what a couple drop-outs can do."

The Kylix hadn't been made for this kind of speed.

The walls rattled, threatening to peel away. Cad had added extra layers, but I was sure we were down to the last.

Some screws and nuts we had missed plinked around, thudding into our heads like metal hail. One crashing into my horn and chipping it for good measure.

My tail flailed out behind me so violently it felt as if I were being pulled through my seat by the ass-end, and had to fight to stay reclined in the pilot's seat.

At first, there was just the smell of burning rubber, then plastic. Thick and acrid and nasty. Then the smoke, tendrils of it wafting up to the main cabin through the corridor from the back of the ship. Faint and wispy, white. Then gray, and thick, like fog. Then so black I could barely see my own hands in front of me.

This was a strangling smoke, the kind there'd be consequences for in my sixties or so. If I was lucky. At least this was a violation I'd signed on for, particulates clinging to the silken insides of my lungs like shards of glass all the coughing in the universe wouldn't be able to dislodge.

A bleat was brewing in my throat and, for once, I didn't repress it. The noise receded to a reedy sigh as the smoke vented out, Ush activating a series of fans along the ceiling.

All before us was black, with only brief flashes of color. The windshield a static screen with only snatches of scenes across the galaxy creeping over. The whiff of a purple nebula, a hint of a fresh green star, the suggestion of a moon. Then back to black. Careening past us, swallowing us with such speed it felt as if we weren't moving at all.

"The view is incredible," Ush noted from my side, clinging to her seat, hands clasped around the dashboard as her seatbelt dug into her shoulder.

"Never gets old!" I spared a flat laugh.

"Neither will we, if we don't slow down," said Pool.

Every warning system splayed before them was blaring, some orange, most red. *Body service! Imminent vacuum collapse! Speed check! Engine service! Seatbelt failure!*

Pool activated the map of the galaxy Ant had installed, and zeroed in on a blinking red dot that was growing nearer to a spot marked by a blue dot. Another, not far, was marked with a green square. "Captain?"

"On it," we banked to slide into a gap in a field of ice. It engulfed us just long enough for me to admire the green crystals on the windshield. They melted in the intense heat the Kylix was giving off.

*Antiope*.

I couldn't explain it just then, but I knew she was thinking of me, then, too.

Had to stay present, like Pool said.

"NELSON!" Pool chimed.

Well, so much for that.

The First Mate had trotted off to the back of the ship with an armful of coolants. "I'm fine!" he called back.

"The brakes lubed?" I called.

"They're serviceable!" he replied.

"Good job, First Mate!" I said. "Come buckle up!"

I didn't let up on the speed as he did, now was not the time to slow down. That was for when they saw us.

Right now, the Consuls radar tech would be announcing the arrival of some kind of hypersonic weapon, barreling straight toward Pluto to finish the job before they got a chance to. They were evacuating, maybe some were praying. Whatever God would answer the prayer of a gold-dog was no god of mine

Nelson stumbled through the corridor, clinging to the rivets in the walls. His fingernails bleeding and every strand of peace-fuzz on his head at attention. Soot was splattered over the front of his suit, and puffed out of his mouth when he coughed. “Where’s my–”

I had already reached under the dash to clasp his inhaler, and held it out to him.

He took three long drags on it, coughed a glob of purple phlegm into his hand, and wiped it on the front of his suit. “I’m fine,” he sighed, snatching up his seatbelt and clicking it into place.

Cad found the radio dials, and switched through the channels to find a Libby Kissel tune. Was sure to keep it low, almost muted. This was a soft song:

“*My friend, it’s time to say goodbye*

*The light is going, gone…*

*Don’t weep for me, for soon we’ll be*

*Curled up in bed, alone*

*You know I’ve got a fire lit*

*And, sug’, it’s just for you*

*My heart, my mind, my eyes, my lips*

*My soul is all yours, too*

*If they come between us*

*I'll put it on the line*

*If time, it comes for us to part*

*My baby, do not cry*

*Your heart, your mind, your eyes, your lips*

*If ever they grow cold*

*Your soul, will warm me drain by drain*

*You'll never be alone"*

"This is bumming me out," I said. "Put on something fast, and turn it up a bit."

But just when he did, the signal snapped out and something else overrided the music. A robotic voice, but I couldn't tell if it was a live human or not, "*Halt! You're in Terrex territory, and we must ascertain your purpose. Please pause for boarding, have documents at the ready– Halt! You're in Terrex–*"

"I don't like this song," Nelson snapped the radio off.

"We must be getting close," said Ush.

At once, everyone jerked to shield their eyes.

White-gold rays of starshine were stabbing through the corner of the windshield. I brought the Kylix to a moderate taxi to guide us into the light.

Domum Ra burned at the center of the Earthen solar system, shedding its light all over the eight planetary bodies, and its heat all over us.

We'd glided in closer than I meant, we could damn near make out the red sunspots on the big star's surface. Boiling hot and lava-like, like homegrown pits of hell.

The rays themselves, though, were heavenly.

Each jet swept over us, from the toes up. Even through my suit, I delighted in the warmth. It was like the breath of a lover on my body, moving closer to my face. Gold droplets dripping through my helmet to plant a wet, warm kiss on my lips.

I removed my glove, and reached out to it.

Shivered when I held a ray in my hand. My tail angling on its own to bask in the warmth, a plant out of my control.

For several axons, all was still.

Pool's scales opened to eat the light. They swallowed as if to take it physically into their mouth, eyes glazing over. "I needed that," they said. "It's been a while since I ate."

"How does it taste?" said Cad.

Pool took his hand. "Sweet."

The sun, through my hair like my lover's fingers. The sun, on my tongue like her essence in my mouth. The sun, in my ear like her honeyed voice.

"It's time," I pulled my glove back on, and guided the Kylix around Saturn's ghostly rings back toward our real goal.

The cosmopods were ahead of us by now, green and just marbles in the distance rolling toward the tiny beige Pluto. Just past my shoulder, to the back of me, Mars seemed to tease me. Maybe I'd been drawn to the other half of our mission, to Ant. That's why I'd overshot.

Forget the back of my mind, she *was* my mind, then.

The two gold, spindley Consulate Complexes on Mars' misshappen moons were well enough, yet. The North one, on Phobos, loomed large and arching up toward even more distant stars. The South one, on Deimos, mirrored its twin. Though, even I could tell there was an unusual amount of activity in the parking structures.

This was some kind of conference, these were pretty common at the Consulate. It only just then occurred to me what Aries had said to Pool the Elder. Something like *'I hope to see you at the Peace Conference.*'

He really had planned for everything.

A shiver ran down my spine, into my tail, causing the fur, there, to raise like hackles. "Everything but us," I said aloud.

"What was that, Captain?" said Cad.

"Nothing," I said. "It's nothing."

Specks that could've been mistaken for stars if they weren't growing larger in the windshield drifted into view. At least a dozen, all flying in smooth semicircular arcs out from Pluto, hurtling toward us.

The Vogiviq were in the clear, now it was up to us to keep the dogs entertained.

"Activate your helmets," I said. "The last thing we need is vomit flying everywhere."

My crew did as they were told.

The nearest Parasite, a silver Jeffington-brand ship with blue, red, and white lights blaring, came upon us. The ships were nearly nose-to-nose when I yanked the wheel to my chest.

The Kylix turned ninety degrees upward.

I slammed my foot down on the acceleration.

Now we traveled that way, too.

The Jeffington continued traveling forward, probably more due to negligence than intention. They hadn't encountered a disobeying vessel, yet.

I turned the Kylix belly-up, strained through gravity to keep accelerating. Easing the wheel inward so we turned looped in a perfect O back at the Parasite.

The nose thrust through the Parasite's windshield.

This, too, had been reinforced. And had suffered less from velocity shedding as the body.

Our ship had a horn, and by todrain, it would be bloodied.

"You ready?" I turned to Cad.

He nodded, sliding into the pilot's seat as I activated my helmet and made for the hatch.

"Wait," Ush called. She tossed me a hotshot I hardly remembered packing. "A gift from Cad's brother."

"Right," I said, sliding onto my beltloop.

"You've always been the smart one," said Cad.

"Sure," she shrugged. "Now fly this thing, Mate."

Cad nodded, backing the ship out of the wrecked Parasite as I slid out of the hatch atop the Kylix.

The open space here wasn't freezing like out in the real O.S. It didn't burn, either. It was pleasantly warm. So I was snug in my suit when I barreled toward the nose of the Kylix, and leaped off the end.

Glass threw rays of sunlight into my eyes and across the expanse of the Parasite. White, gold, and pink–fuzzing my vision so I had to rely on the feel of the jagged, broken-in windshield to pull myself aboard.

The xenogene pilot was dead, all according to plan. But their seat was caved inward, too. This, I hadn't accounted for.

A laser caught me in the shoulder, glancing off my suit.

It sutured–singed–while I turned my attention to the Captain. If one could even be a Captain without a crew, that was.

Police Parasites were piloted by xenos, and staffed with typically just one or two officers in deep blue suits. After all, there wasn't supposed to be any major trouble in the solar system.

The man staring me down was Terran, but Black as Cad and me. With a thick mustache, the skin around which was pulled back into a deep and gutteral snarl.

He was built huge, so tall I could tell he had to duck to enter the central cabin.

But those burly arms trembled as they gripped the hotshot aiming at me.

"Go on, then," I said. "Shoot. You're only killing a locustrat."

He was young, probably just in his early thirties, with thick, twisted hair. When he spoke, though, it was with an older kind of voice. Someone else's, loaned to him along with that gold badge on his suit. The badge itself displayed the Terrex crest: Aries and Athena, suckling on that gold dog. "Turn around, and put your hands behind your back!"

"Kill me."

"I will, if you do not comply." So this confirmed it. He'd shot before fixing eyes on me. Now that he knew who I was, the orders were to take me alive.

This might be easier than I thought.

If the Colonies were trying to make an example of me, I could give them something to take note of.

I flexed my neck, and my jaws. Deactivated my helmet.

"D-Don't–" But I was already on him.

My horns made contact with his torso, and he twisted to slam the butt of his hotshot into my helmet.

My brain rocked against the other side of my skull, and there'd be swelling, later. For now, there was the THUD of the officer's body slamming into the wall.

His desperate clammering at my head neck as my horns tore through his suit.

It tried to sew itself back together, but I thrashed, tearing it more. Just open enough for the tips of my horns to meet flesh.

Now, he did shoot.

Once, through the windshield, in his frenzy.

Again, this time at my leg.

One more time, at my foot. My right boot melting into nasty, molten rubber mush. Binding to my skin, and sending hot, urgent pain signals up my spine.

It was too late. His intestine were throbbing, pink, and within my jaws.

I tore them out of him.

I could've just shot him, but I needed him alive, too. That, and a rage I couldn't recognize had taken the place of reason.

If I was missing a toe or half a foot when this was over, so be it.

As long as I had my horns and my sabers, they could take everything else and shove it right up their–

The officer collapsed, sinking to the floor.

He wasn't dead, he wasn't even unconscious. No, he groaned, and reached for his entrails.

I took his hotshot from the floor.

It was wet, and dripped down my leg when I clipped it to my belt. Turned my back on the officer while he bled out.

"I don't have anything…" he moaned. "Why? Please God…"

I had to sit up in the pilot's seat, the back was completely busted. Hanging from one of four hinges. "Then why are you here?" I didn't look at him. Found the tiny switch under the dashboard Crest had explained to me. Flicked it in one direction.

A shimmer ran over the cabin, creeping over my seat, and up my suit.

So it was true. A smashed windshield still granted the inhabitants of a ship cloaking.

Ush might've been onto something, we were two-for-four on gambles paying off big-time.

I tried to get comfortable, but couldn't, settled for buckling in, and slamming my burned foot down on the acceleration.

The Kylix was about a dozen cometons to my side, so I banked and swooped in low. Two Parasites were coming right at it. This time, they were coming to a stop.

"It's the pipe, isn't it?" I called back over the chittering glass. "If you tell me the truth, I'll drop you off at Martian General. They can sew you up, trust me."

The officer's slumped body slid to the side, and he screamed. "*YES!*"

I watched one Parasite's hatch open. A blue-suitted Terran threw some kind of metal ball.

It exploded as the Kylix veered upward.

Blasting the belly with fire and iron spikes.

"Yes, it's the pipe?"

"They're sweeping the encampment, okay?" he panted. There was a queer sound, the low whine of electric static. A live feed. "They're…I don't know, they need it cleared out by tomorrow."

"Tomorrow…" Now, there was a word that didn't feature much in the Griever vocabulary. "But there's not enough of you," I said. "There's a hundred protestors chained to the pipe *alone*."

"We weren't sent…to make arrests…" Then, he was too silent.

"Slide it to me," I said. I didn't need to look back to know he was fiddling with something.

It rode on a streak of blood to my boots.

A radio.

I clipped it to my belt, ladden with many more things than usual, the waist of my suit sagged around me.

I guided the Parasite between the widening gap between the Kylix and the flashing ship before it.

Waiting for the officer to pop out of the hatch, again, and cupped my hands above me.

Another bomb launched across the expanse.

I didn't catch it, at first.

It thudded into the cabin, and I unlatched my belt. Looked back at the cowering officer.

I took it into my hands. Ignored my frying fingers to loose it back at the ship.

It would've been ideal for it to go back through the hatch, into the belly of the beast. But it made contact, that was enough.

The Parasite rocked backward in the explosion. The windshield shattering, burping up both officers inside.

They struggled to activate their helmets, but stopped struggling soon enough.

The Parasite to the back of the Kylix had caught wise.

The radio whined, static falling away to stern, harried words: "*Paulson, come in!*"

"That you?" I leaned back in the seat to address the officer.

He had managed to stuff the majority of his organs back into play, but no longer had the skin to keep them there. Hugging his body, he nodded, one cheek to the floor, cutting on the glass. "Camden Paulson," he confirmed. "That's our Constable, Kurt Rennard."

"He's the one calling the shots back on Pluto?"

Though it pained him, Officer Paulson nodded.

"Where are you? Come in, Paulson," Rennard repeated, over the radio.

I looked down at Paulson, crouched to hold the radio to his lips. Held the mute button. "Are you going to be good?" I used one arm to haul him upward, held it to his throat to keep him sitting rather than leaning.

Paulson's faint pulse worked against my hot palm. His eyes searched mine, were a deep hazel I would've admired in any other circumstance. Maybe it was proof of some lineage that had granted him such a position. "*Yes…"* he strained, gulping.

"Tell him to call for reinforcements, everyone off of Pluto," I said. "There's a bomb, a Blunder."

Paulson winced at the word, scrambling backward as if to claw his way through the wall and into the corridor. "H-h-how–?"

"Don't worry about how," I said. "The less you say the better…" I looked down at his gaping wound.

With every word from his mouth, more blood surged out around his fingers.

His eyes flicked to the corner of the room, where the xeno pilot lay with two limbs, an arm and a leg, severed. Their blood had already congealed, and grown purple. Thick, and cold.

"I'm the only one that can help you, now, Paulson," I said. "And don't try anything slick, if they shell the protesters, I'll be the least of your worries. You can wave goodbye to the Milky Way."

Now, he looked past me, and I didn't have to ask to know he was searching for Earth. "Okay," he said. I unmuted the radio, and he spoke into the receiver. "Rennard, it's Paulson. Come in."

"WHERE THE FUCK ARE YOU?"

"I'm held up," said Paulson, looking to me. "My pilot's taken me off course, back toward Earth. We've received credi–" He coughed, and his eyes dimmed. More blood, less life. "A credible tip that there's a Blunder back on Pluto. Call everyone off."

Rennard must've been screaming too loud for the radio to pick up on such frequencies. His voice went in and out: "What the hell…on about? A tip…*who*?"

"Anonymous, Constable," Paulson said.

"A Blunder?" said Rennard. "How stupid do you have to be to believe that?"

Doubt flashed across Paulson's face.

So the CBI hadn't been drip-feeding info to the low-ranks, then.

I wasn't sure if that made them more or less nefarious.

Rennard said, "Did you even ask for proof?"

Shit, we had none.

Through the windshield, the Kylix pulled off a simple upward yo-yo to ram into another flashing Parasite, but this one had some kind of holographic cube encasing it. It had black-and-white banding around the ship. The middle band of which had *VINCERE SORTEM NOSTRAM* enscribed in gold along it.

"That's your Constable," I said, muting the radio. It was more of an observation than a question.

"Yes," said Paulson, yelping as I eased off his throat and let him slump to the side, once more.

I didn't want to distract the Great Snake crew, but if there was anyone left in the ship at this point, it was worth a shot reaching out to who it was sure to be. But, shit, I hadn't exactly written her number on my arm.

Wait, I didn't have to. She was already listening.

I brought the radio to my lips. "Janelle!" I called. "I know you scanned the Blunder for–"

"Who is this?" Rennard interrupted.

I pressed on, "I know you have a scan of the Blunder, project it. The way you did…the other thing." Me and Antiope, maybe she should've taken that bite back in the barn.

I watched as the Kylix fought against some blue arm reaching out from the Constable's ship. Struggled in the grasp of it, until the hologram encased it. It seemed the Colonies had been experimenting with stunStone tech.

"Oh, fuck me," I threw myself back into the pilot's seat.

The Parasite was growing lethargic after taking so much damage, but I pushed it as hard as I could toward the underbelly of the Constable's ship. Stopping just short of ramming it.

"If I make contact with the hologram…" I said.

"You're not really taking me to the hospital, are you?" said Paulson.

If hope was lost, he'd outgrown his usefulness.

I plucked the unstained hotshot from my hip, and aimed it at his head. "We won't have time to," I said. "If we get trapped, will we?"

Paulson said nothing.

I leapt from the wheel, and made for the engine room. Striding past Paulson, my boots trailing his blood through the corridor.

I'd been so concerned about what Cad was learning from me, now I could hardly remember what I'd learned from him.

"Battery," I found the indented handle for the breaker-box. "Battery…"

Had he ever mentioned what they looked like?

Inside the inner workings of the ship, there was no dust. I imagined the xeno pilot had been made to lick it clean upon every landing.

The breakers were all set, none tripped. Yet.

The engine was small, but more advanced than the Kylix, even with the newest editions. This was state-of-the-art. Meant to endure long, fast pursuits, and power the ship through certain common emergencies.

A series of wires ran into a black cube with warning labels on every inch of it. Including one featuring a hand and a lightning bolt.

"Battery," I confirmed.

I wracked my brain, but the best I could muster was a vague memory of Cad warning me never to touch it without insulated gloves.

I ran back to the central cabin, and wrapped two pieces of Paulson's torn suit around my hands. Three layers, each. That would have to do for now.

Clumsily, I ripped the wires from the battery, and earned a shock for my trouble. Even to my own nose, my flesh smelled good.

A pang shot through me. What kind of creature was I?

I regretted what I'd done to Paulson, but if it was him or the protesters, obnoxious as they might be… I was glad it was him.

I tried to keep skin-to-metal contact with the battery low as I hefted it out of the panel and to the central cabin.

Paulson's eyes glowed blue as a projection stuttered over the dashboard. It must've been burning through the excess energy, or maybe running off of some kind of back-up generator in the walls somewhere.

The Blunder was uncased, and spinning. The black within the bottle outlined in white, as if to emphasize the contents. As if to say "*You don't want to fuck with this!*"

Janelle had heard me.

Three-for-four.

Tendrils of lightning flashed in the Blunder, urging me to the windshield.

I snatched the radio up from the pilot's seat. "Thank you," I said.

"This is–" Rennard cleared their throat. "This is nothing else we haven't seen before. It's the Blunder from forty-five, you idiot!"

I reached under the dashboard, and flipped the cloaking switch nine times, fast. We were under the Constable's ship, but if there was even a chance Cad could see me.

I rewrapped my hands, but received another shock, still, when I lifted the battery over my head.

There was no gravity in space, so propulsion would depend entirely on me.

"*Please*," I said. "JUMP!"

With my exposed toe, I flipped the switch one more time, used my elbow to flash the headlights. *NOW!*

I threw the battery at the Constable's ship with such force as to send me tripping over the windshield. A deep stab of pain erupted in my lower back, and simmed in my belly.

Jagged shards of glass still clinging to it bit at my sleeves, tore at my torso.

I caught myself with my intact boot, and jolted back inside. My ass landing in the pilot's seat.

The battery spun in space, but didn't stall.

There was just a small distance to close.

Just one cometon.

One yard.

Two feet.

One inch.

It bounced off the holographic cube, and I releashed a breath that seemed to have resided in the pit of my stomach.

A crack ran up the cube, red, then blue, then white.

Spreading, like spider webbing. Creeping fingers closing around the Parasite above me, shaking it within its electric fist. All while rivers of lightning swam across the connective river to rock the Kylix.

My fur stood on end, again. This time, my hair joined it. Tangles I hadn't seen in over a decade unfurling for just a moment, to reach out toward the ships.

My hair snapped back into place as bolts of lightning struck inward with the speed of a bulb turning on. And the Constable's ship exploded.

Flaming panels shot outward.

At the same time, the hologram vanished, and the Kylix rocketed backward.

Charred, smoking limbs trailed floating droplets of blood.

A hand with a gold ring on it slapped me in the face.

I'm not proud of this, but when I took it into my own hands, I wanted to bite into it.

"It's the bomb!" came the radio, a voice I didn't recognize. One of the circling Parasites. I'd just about lost track of them, with everything happening aboard. "FALL BACK!"

"Switch channels," came another voice. "They're listening!"

I didn't care to chase whatever channel they were changing to, I went after the Kylix.

A fire bloomed in the tail-end of the ship as I neared it. Smoke curling out and into space. Slow, thick, and black.

I couldn't remember–had we thrown out the fire extinguisher while lightening the load?

The hatch opened as it stopped spinning, dipping up and down where it hovered.

Parasites barreled past, even when I deactivated the cloak.

Smoke churned out of the open hatch like a chimney.

When it cleared, Pool was there, waving a red rag.

They peered through the smoke, and waved the rag again. Nodding. I got the message, but they still went through the effort of extending their metal thumb up.

Tears that had been stuck in my eyelashes spilled down my cheeks. The taste of them was sweeter than blood, better than flesh.

Again, I lifted the radio to my mouth. “Janelle, are you there?” I said. “*Thank you*.” I collapsed in the seat. “You still need that hospital, Paulson?”

He didn’t say anything, I hadn’t really expected him to. When I glanced over the back of the seat, Camden Paulson was dead.

Even with just the slight motion, another pang rang through my body. And this time, a warm jet of blood slithered out of me, and down my leg. Seeping into my open boot to color my singed, freezing foot red.

“Light bleeding is normal,” I said. “That’s what you told me.”

“You’re in pain, Jean,” Ush pocketed her stethoscope. “Your heartbeat is only just outside of regular patterns, just a bit slow.” She clapped the back of her hand to my forehead, then my cheek, then my neck, then my–

“Whoa, hold on–”

“You’re feverish,” she dug a tin out of her pocket, and produced four red ovals. Pills. “Take these. Ibuprofen should help with that, but you need to rest, most importantly.” She sighed, and an aged kind of look came over her. “I should never have let you come here–”

“*Let me*?” I chewed the pills, and swallowed. I knew it wasn’t proper, but the pain really was getting to me, I needed them to get to work fast. It was sort of like if menstrual cramps wrapped around to the back, as well as the groin. Just at the small of my back, there seemed to be a hot coal lodged into my spine in place of a disc. “I’m your Captain!”

"You're my friend," Ush's voice was high, strained, and breaking. The Doctor took me into her arms, gathered me up like a pile of twigs, and just about snapped me like them, too. "If anything happened to you, I would never be able to forgive myself."

I hugged her back, stroked her transparent sleeve. The tattoo underneath. "I'm not the one you owe," I said. "I owe *you*, really. Your debt is paid, as far as I'm concerned. I'm not Atticus R, there's no ledger."

"There could never be a ledger for love, Captain," Ush releashed me, and strode to the door of her lab. Opened it. "It wouldn't be fair to any of us if you pushed yourself too hard. *Please*, I'm just asking you to care for yourself the way you care for us."

"I do," I got to my feet, but a wave of nausea hit me. Had to be strong, the last thing I needed was to double over and have Ush sedate me. And I knew she'd do it, consent or no consent. Ethics were something I was learning to leave out of the question when it came to Doctor Lugomir. "I mean, I *think* I do."

"Then think harder," she held the door for me, and we exited out into the corridor. Avoided each other's gaze as we entered the steering cabin.

We'd landed half-an-auron ago, long enough to know our side of everything had shook out. In what condition, and how shaken, was another matter. It was out.

People's pipe was splayed out before the windshield. The Vogiviq ignoring the grimacing, wincing Grievers as they unchained them.

The Blunder–flashed for just a moment–was back in its encasement, the suitcase shackled and chained around the pipe. A replacement sacrifice.

Great Griever, we'd done it.

Whatever Parasites had hosed down the dripping Grievers had fled. Their hounds with them, though two brown-furred dogs had been beaten to death with chains by those bitten. Strung up, their bodies hanging, one on either side of the suspended Blunder.

A small outcropping of rock shielded the suitcase, but it would require twenty-nine/eight defense. We could never let our guards down.

In terms of casualties, five corpses were unchained from the pipe. Four due to exposure, the freezing temperatures paired with being drenched, one with a hole bored through their chest. Though, a part of me wondered if that was a mercy, they were so emaciated.

Pluto wasn't like the other planets, it wasn't a planet at all, really. Had that privilege revoked eons ago. Now, the craggy, beige surface was a desert save for the ice wells. And those were plentiful, and would be for quite some time.

"Will you hold it down, here?" I asked River.

"We can," they said. "We'll have to work out an intense schedule for flyovers, someone must remain in orbit." They squinted out toward the expanse. "But, so close to Earth…"

"It should be a Griever's responsibility," I said. "You've done your part, and exceptionally well."

"We're all Grievers, now," said River.

"We owe you," I said.

They shrugged. "How about you refrain from mentioning that incident on the pyramid to your Medusa compeers, and we're even?"

"The Undergal," I said. Right, River had committed a massacre. To think, in the flurry of everything that had happened since, that had slipped my mind. "What incident?" I winked, but they studied my face in such a way that I felt I had to clarify. "It's water under the bridge."

As apt an expression now, than ever. And a good one to leave them on. Pool and Cad holding hands while their other hands stroked River's waist and cheek, respectively. Cad gave River a kiss that would've just about knocked the wind out of me, but only seemed to feed something in the Kaleidizen.

I strode back to the Kylix, and started up the rungs to the hatch. Dried, caked blood still coated the ladder.

It was freezing to the touch. I wiped it on the front of my suit, and it flaked off in crystals.

"Jean?" Cad trotted up to the bottom rung. "Where are you going?"

"We haven't heard a word from Mars," I said. "I have to find her."

"We're supposed to link back up on Medusa," he said.

I chuckled, couldn't help myself. "When have we ever done what we're supposed to do?"

He nodded, grunting, as he hefted himself up after me. "I'm coming with you."

"No," I said. "Stay here, we'll regroup just as planned. I just…can't leave without her." I caught Ush's eye, from a gaggle of Grievers she was treating.

She shook her head, and I looked away.

"I love you, okay?" I said.

"I know," said the First Mate. "And you know how much I love you." They ascended another rung, then another. Their cheek almost brushing against my melted boot. "That's why I won't watch you go somewhere alone."

I swiped at my welling tears, I'd just about had enough of the crying. I stuck my hand in my pocket, then reached down and clutched his. "You're the best mate I've ever had, Cad," I said. "It'll be a squeeze, but the downed Jeffington should fit about forty of the protesters." When I pulled my hand back, he held the key to the Parasite. "The pods should fit the rest."

"Jean–"

I shoved him once, hard, in the chest. He landed on his ass in a haze of biege dust. "I'm sorry," I closed the hatch, and found my seat at the dashboard.

The Kylix was a wreck, but it ran smooth. Those extra engines were treating it well, and only one had combusted. I didn't need to push it.

Mars was in the neighborhood, as far as planets went.

And I didn't want to be unneighborly.

The parking lots were empty, not even the Great Snake was present. Though, I figured, it could be, just invisible. Still, there was a sort of empty *feeling* that told me it wasn't.

The North tower had been the one they would have evacuated first, Janelle sending instructions to Lynnie and Yilig in each tower on how to disarm the bombs planted on the fifteenth floors. If the Central Bureau of Inquiry had made it that far, and we were pretty sure they had. Planning ahead, and hiding the bombs within desks. This was hinted at in Huber's documents. Which Janelle would have leaked to the press about an auron ago, though I didn't have the stomach to turn on the radio, just then.

I parked the Kylix, I didn't care who saw it there, and decided to start with the South tower. It would've been the most recent they'd evacuated. That, and something about it was calling to me.

*Antiope.*

Inside, the golden lobby was the most extravagant sight I'd come across. Wooden pillars, complete trees, stretched up to the ceiling. Leaves branching out from the body to kiss the crystal chandelier hanging over a silken carpet.

A directory was carved into it.

There was the Executive Suite, that sounded promising. Then again, so did the Presidential Suite? Aries had come here for a meeting, but there were at least two dozen meeting rooms. Junior, Senior, International…

"Damn it!" I struck the pillar, and my knuckles crunched against it.

Bloodied, and bruised, I hugged my hand to me.

My own blood introduced a very stark scent to the Complex. It was so clean, so chemically scrubbed-down, that organic scents stood out like a tomato in a chemistry lab.

I thought back to SootFoot's advice. This wouldn't be a matter of reason, it would be a matter of instinct.

I took in a deep breath, though my nose. And let it out.

Leather, mud, dirt, dust, heat, skin, frost, blood, water, food, wine, panic, sex, saliva.

No.

Beer, Morrow, weathered cloth, soup, rust, smoke, and a hint of me.

Yes.

Yes, I had her.

The elevator couldn't be trusted, I never liked those things, anyway. I clambored for the stairs. A winding staircase with diamonds inlaid into the toe of her step. Footprints spelling out some kind of rush for the door, shadows of the evacuation.

Yes, there was a shirt, probably having fallen out of someone's suitcase.

A printed paper with dry tax information on it.

A red sucker, with the toothmarks of some child on the end of it. Evidence of a nervous habit.

Six stories, ten, fifteen, twenty.

A tube of lipstick, uncapped and smudging.

A trampled can of Cosmic Cola.

A smattering of iridescent scales.

A watch, still ticking, gold hands on a black face.

Thirty stories, forty. Fifty-one.

A navy baseball cap, crumpled and inside out. The insides brimmed with emerald cloth, silken and fitted just-so.

I picked it up, ran my fingers along the green snowflake embroidered on the front.

I deactivated my helmet just for an axon, to fix the cap on my head.

Reactivated it as I turn to the open door to my right. Just a crack, a smattering of rainbow light, as if from a painted window, spilling out into the walkway.

I followed it, tread over the colors to push the door open more, taking both hotshots into my hands. “Ant?”

Inside, it was a conference room. Standard, except for the fountain in the corner. A golden dog with teats leaking green water into a basin. Spigots feeding the water back into the dog’s open mouth, just for it to drip out again.

There was a square table, shorter than those intended for most meetings. This was an intimate room, meant for very private affairs.

There were just six seats, big leather chairs with wheels on them.

Seated at one end of the table, in front of the painted window–which depicted a dog, a horse, a cow, a pig, and and a chicken sating themselves at a verdant blue stream–was Aries Adams. His hands folded atop a black folder, and a grin widening on his face.

He was without his helmet, and without a proper spacesuit. Squeezed into something formal, gold, and rigid. I hadn't considered that the Complexes were oxygenated, that did explain all the ornamentation. Vents were ugly, utilitarian things. They only served to remind one of death at their door. I deactivated my helmet, again, and turned my attention to the other party.

At the other end–

"Ant," I didn't restrain myself, throwing myself over her. Her skin was warm, still, and her lips, too, when they found mine.

She didn't hold back at all, actually. Pushing away from the table to hold me. Burying her face in my neck, and planting a kiss, there.

When she pulled back, her eyes were spinning so wildly I wondered if she'd been drugged. Black marbles, stopping at random points on my person. Face, shoulder, torso, groin, knee– "Your foot!" she cried, kneeling to tend to it.

I winced as she pawwed at the laces and straps, mostly melted away–and into me. "I'm fine," I said. "Are you?"

"*Jay*," she worked her way back up to my face. Her hair was wild, sticking up at the straight end, close to her scalp, and frizzing at the curled ends. Tangling.

She took me by the face, and planted another kiss on me. This one, deep and slow.

I didn't think Ush would have to worry about my heartbeat, anymore. It was chugging along quite well.

I let her lap at the roof of my mouth, run her tongue along my sabers. Fingers playing along my horns, stroking them until I groaned.

Now, it was my turn to be uninhibited.

I found her waist, strummed the small of her back. One hand sliding around to fondle her breast. I buried my face, there, in her chest. And listened to her own heart.

Steady. Fast, like mine, but steady.

"Ant," I kissed her forehead, cupped her cheek. "What happened? Where's–*everyone*?" I lowered my voice to say this.

"I sent them away," she said. "They did their part…Now, it's time for me to do mine."

I hadn't noticed the guns dropping away from me, but they were on the green carpet. She picked up one, and handed me the other. "I knew you would pick me up," she had anticipated my next question.

"Are you done, Jean?" Aries spoke, and his voice was like a swarm of spiders creeping over me. "Or would you be needing more time with my daughter?" He hefted himself up from his chair. "I can leave for thirty minutes, and come back. That seems to be about your average time to establish a level of *intimacy*."

Despite everything, I managed to laugh. Just twice, hard, barking sounds. "You're a fool if you don't count the warm-up," I said. "At least factor in the cuddles, afterward."

"Right," said Aries, enunicating the word so his teeth clacked together at the end of it with a SNAP. As if he were taking a bite of something. When he paced around the end of the room, though, he only looked old. His knees trembled, and his hand was unsteady when it gripped the globe of Earth on the count to our right. He turned it, to gaze into the United States. "It's all in your chart. Witty, but restless. Unfocused, yet dedicated. Rebellious, but studious."

My eyes wandered, just for an axon, to the black folder on the table. Just long enough for him to notice. Pale green eyes locked on mine, and a faint smile on his lips.

"We're not interested in talking," I said.

"My daughter is," said Aries, giving the globe one final, careless spin before finding his seat, once more. He motioned for us to join him at the table.

I didn't, at first.

Ant did.

If I could take a page out of Cad's book, for once, I could manage to follow her lead. So I did. Though I didn't sit at her side, but in her lap.

Ant cradled my head, and hugged me close to her. I didn't care how childish it seemed, as far as I was concerned, there was no room for me in embarrassment, maybe there never would be again. There was only love.

"Talk about what?" I said, as much to her, as him.

"Well," Aries splayed his hands to the heavens. "There's a few hiccups in my plans, but, chiefly, my main concern, and this is the darndest thing–" He chuckled to himself, but it erupted it into genuine laughter. The kind that brought tears to his eyes, that he didn't bother to swipe away. "This tower was supposed to go down, with me in it."

Icy acupuncture overtook me, every pore, the burning kind of frozen.

"You…" I looked to Ant.

Her mouth twitched, but her eyes were still and hard. So this was the hold-up. Aries *wanted* to die?

"Great Griever…" I swore. We were playing right into his hand. "*Why?*"

"Well," Aries shrugged, giving his chair a little spin. Kicked up his legs like a schoolboy exploring his father's office. "Why do they call Grievers that? You ever think about that? They don't call you Survivors, or Remainders."

"I…" I gulped. "I hadn't thought about that."

"Martyrs live forever," said Aries Adams. "In death, they're enshrined in history. They inspire people, sometimes more than they did alive."

Ant sniffled, and when I looked at her, fat tears were rolling down her cheeks. "Dad," she drew her forearm across her face. "It would be one thing if–You know I can't–How can you even…?"

"It was to be Elder Pool and I," he continued. "The devastation would drive our kinds together, bind us til we were one."

"At the expense of the Octils," I spat, clapping my hands on the table. "Three genocides in one lifetime, your legacy wouldn't be as sterling as you think it would be!"

"Time will be kind to me," Aries said, evenly.

"No," I shook my head.

"And, what's more, there's something in it for both of you." He slid the black folder across the table, and it came to a rest at my fingertips. "To Antiope, my will dictates that you inherit a lifetime position in the Terrex Supreme Court."

"I don't have a law degree," Ant said, as if that were all that was holding her back.

"It's just a clerking job, relax, dear," said Aries. "Low-level, but they serve for decades. Job security, a pension when you retire, you could oversee the legalization of off-Earth citizenship. See the demilitarization of Kaleidizen nesting grounds, the dismantling of the Lunar Checkpoint. Shepherd in an age of inter-kind marriage."

"We're not getting married," I said.

Aries glanced down, then cleared his throat. "It is…*disappointing* that you would see the sustainability of Griever life as so…How should I put it…? Disposable."

This game was getting old, but my jaws opened to bite the bait. “What do you know?” I said.

“I know every ship requires Amulius,” Aries breezed. “I know I only have two children, now.”

Ant choked on a new surge of tears. When she moved to bury her face in her hands, I stopped her. Pried her hands away from her eyes. I said, “Artemis brought that–”

“On herself, yes,” Aries nodded. “We’re in agreement. Needless to say, that mission was completely unauthorized. Unprofessional. Unbecoming.” He grimaced, and strode to a cabinet above the counter. Struggled to heave a half-empty bottle of amber fluid in a thick, ornate, glass bottle from the shelf inside.

Pulled out three glasses.

Slowly, he poured out three drinks.

“Don’t bother,” I said. “I only drink beer.”

“Kylix Kolsch, yes?” He poured one glass back, and rooted around in the cabinet. Pulled out a can as I shook my head. “Believe it, it’s a seventy-three batch.” He squinted at the label. “*Now featuring notes of vanilla, cucumber, and*–this is interesting–*bell pepper*.” It was one of our best. I could taste it even as he described it.

He placed the glass of liquor in front of Ant, and the beer in front of me.

Sipped from his own glass as he removed some kind of stale-smelling carton from the cabinet. “You smoke, Captain?”

“No,” I said.

He paid me no mind, setting two thick, brown, hand-length cylinders in front of us. Like streaksticks, but much larger. And with a heady, leafy kind of scent. Earthen. “Tobacco,” he said.

"A good cigar always seals any decent deal." He swilled from his glass, again, licking his lips. "Will the bourbon do, Antiope, or would you prefer a beer, as well?"

"Dad…" Ant quavered. "What about Apollo? Where is he?"

"Limping back from Morrow," said Aries, producing a lighter and dragging on one end of the cigar. The smoke that drifted out smelled sweet, but the smoke he coughed up smelled sour. "Or, sorry, Medusa. That's the moon, isn't it?" He tsked, shaking his head as he polished off his glass. "So *edgy*, Artemis taught me that word." He poured more bourbon. "Though, I have been conditioned into an appreciation for Greek culture."

"Greek?" I said. Was this some kind of insult, like Oozers. Or just Earth slang.

"It's a country," said Ant, reading my expression. "Back on Earth, in something called Europe. That's a continent." She sounded almost wistful. "Medusa is a monster, in their myths. She's raped by one of the gods, gets punished for it."

"They punish their victim," I said. "Sounds like Earth to me."

"Like I said," Aries repeated, "*Edgy*."

"So," I said. "What's in it for me?" I tapped the folder with one finger, as if it were covered in flesh-eating bacteria. "You said there was something in it for both of us, right?"

"Yes," Aries smacked his lips, and uttered an, "Ahhh," as he finished another glass. And I thought *I* was an alcoholic. "I'm glad you asked." He sauntered to his seat with a third glassful. "Inside that folder, Jean, is your genetic sourcecode."

"My what?" I scoffed. "I already know what I am, genius. Just *look at me*." Though, I wasn't sure what I meant by that, exactly. My tail, my horns, my ears, my sabers. Or if I meant the Griever part, I was obviously Black. My hair, my nose, my complexion, my eyes.

"Yes, well," Aries sipped from his glass. "I just thought you'd like to know that your parents are both alive. And they're not on Earth, they're on Lochusk."

"As if," I rolled my eyes. "If you think I'd do anything for you just to have the names of two complete strangers, you've got another thing coming."

"It's up to you," said Aries. "You have two half-siblings, by the way. One older, and one younger." He shrugged. "Most of the gammette pairings were two strangers, but it seems your mother and father are married, or were. Or maybe it was just a fling, I hate to assume…" He made a face in disgust, waving a hand as if to ward off some thought. "A package deal. Divorced, or separated, they're both still there."

Two human siblings. "Wow," I had to recline, Ant stretching out an arm over me and turning me to face her as Aries added:

"Sisters."

"Jean," she spoke low. This was just for me. Now, it was just the two of us. "That's why I waited, it wasn't fair to leave without…I needed you to know, to weigh in."

I nodded, but my head felt as if it might roll clean off my neck and across the table. "I appreciate that," I said.

"I know it's a lot to think about?"

Now, more laughter. All too genuine. What kind of circus had we found ourselves in? "Starshine," I snickered. "You've got *no idea*." I addressed Aries, raising my voice. "So what kind of terms are these?" I said. "I mean, what are the consequences if we reject the proposal?"

Aries wagged a finger. "Slow down, there's one more thing," he said. "If you accept, I'll commute your sentence to 'Time served.' All of you, every member of your, er, crew."

Another blow, the heaviest yet. “What’s to stop us from killing you, and passing it off as your decision. It’ll say that in your will, won’t it?”

“Smart,” Aries said. “I did bet on that.” He pulled out a rectangular pen, and clicked the end of it. It was some kind of portable visojecter. A blank, blue screen erupting from the pen’s side. “If you agree, I will *personally* broadcast a galaxy-wide video declaring the documents as true, proper, and lawful. If you don’t, everyone will assume they’re counterfeit, a fabrication from a desperate crew of criminals.” He deactivated the pen, and sighed. His head in his hands, and swaying slightly in his chair, Aries already looked half-corpse. Maybe four-fifths of the way there. All we had to do was pull the trigger. “It’s been a long life of being milked for the greater good, so people like *you*, Jean, can survive. It hasn’t been a fair life for either of us. Remember, I didn’t ask to be born. I didn’t have parents, either.”

“Boo hoo,” I couldn’t stop myself. “I never destroyed an entire galaxy! I never tried to–”

“Throw someone else under the bus for a killing you were responsible for?” Aries suggested. “My daughter did, though, eh?”

“So it *was* you,” Ant gritted. “Back on the Harmony, in my head, in *our bed*.”

“Who else?” Aries made an easy sort of movement with his hands, as if he were genuinely offended that she’d thought it was someone else. Had *hoped* it was someone else. “It was either me, or *them*.” He jabbed a finger out at the window.

“The Five Families?” Ant volunteered.

“IAPAC,” Aries shook his head. “The Intergalactic Association of People’s Advancement and Conception.” He did another of those goofy gestures, as if he were disappointed in Ant’s lack of curiosity. “Haven’t you ever wondered who ordered my birth? My conception? Who *created* Amulius?”

"I, well…" Ant sighed. "No, I didn't. I know you get your labs done regularly," she said. "I know they drain you twice a month."

"And what kind of life is that?" Aries shook his head, again, and muttered something, I think a swear. "I'm an old man, now. Every drop they take puts me in bed for days–days are turning to weeks–My last fifteen years will be spent in bed if they have their way."

"So you'd have that for *me*, instead?" She shot back. "For Apollo?"

"If you all marry like *Artemis* did," said Aries, "you can spread out the draining. Make it so no one is ever hit as hard as me and Athena. Have children, don't stall progress, just until they find an alternative to Amulius. They've been looking, you know?" he raised one wispy eyebrow.

"I'm sure that's what they've been telling you, Dad," said Ant. "For seventy years."

"So what if humanity runs out of juice out in space?" I said. "No one was meant to orbit for so long, anyway. If we slow down, if we stop traveling altogether. Only burn fuel on vital deliveries, on food, on farming equipment–"

"What of dying stars?" said Aries. "We're lucky here in this solar system. Sol Prozima has thousands of years, left. Maybe hundreds of thousands, I'm no scientist after all. But we're safe here, on Earth. In Open Space, even some reaches of Inner Space, people will need to migrate regularly. And don't they deserve variety, after all? Would you lock them in one place, condemn them to death?"

"How about we all return to Earth?" I hadn't meant to say it, hadn't even thought it, but there it was. Some thought straight out of the ether, as if I was remembering some long-ago dream that was coming to me in flashes. "There's plenty of room, and they're not even recovered, down there. We could help heal it."

It was Aries' turn to laugh, again. "Humans don't *heal* Earth," said the Secretary. "No, we've proven how destructive we are, when we're overpopulated–"

"When we over-consume, more-like," said Ant. "There's entire states back in the U.S. with hardly any residents. Islands with fires burning from sea to sea because the rightful inhabitants aren't there to nurture the land."

"Antiope…" Aries chided. "Don't be idealistic."

"I'm not," she said. "This is what I went to school for, Dad. Not for a position you made up to keep me busy til I'm as gray as you and Aunt Athena." She gripped the end of the table so hard, her hands trembling, that the glass of bourbon tipped over, and spilled onto the carpet.

Against the deep grain, it appeared to stain red. "There's a reason you don't want us to talk about returning to Earth, isn't there?" I said. "You're recording this, aren't you?"

Aries smiled, and his teeth were too straight, too white, and too close together. "You know, Jean," he finished that third glass. "If my daughter had to be with such a creature, I'm glad it's you. You're ambitious, smart, have good intuition." He tapped his temple, and winked.

I understood. The tracker, the recorder this group of scientists had grown within Antiope, was within him, too. Except, despite everything, he hadn't removed it.

"Don't worry," said Aries. "They won't release just *anything*, like your friends on Medusa. IAPAC is more of a home theatre kind of situation."

"They must not have you on too tight of a leash," Ant spoke as the sunlight shifted, then. Splitting over Aries' head to part around him. His shadow falling over the table in a wide and dark shadow. The two rays joining again to bathe me and Ant in light, and heat. "You're here, aren't you?"

"As a tool," Aries nodded. "Not as a visionary, I'm afraid."

"This wasn't your idea?" I said.

"Dying was," Aries sighed. "Everything else, well…The Kaleids aren't the only ones who hold the Blunder against me." He spun in his seat to face the window, and reached out toward the light. "I like to think, in the afterlife, I'll roam the Andromeda." He let the rays play in his fingers, sliding across his fingertips like a golden river. Fractured rainbow chips in his palm. "I've made myself useful, you can never say I didn't."

"The Harmony crew," said Ant.

"It doesn't benefit the Colonies to frame an Adams as morally decrepit," Aries chuckled. "They've spun more stories about me than God has even weaved."

"And what will they say about you, now that the demolition is off?" I said. "You can't blame the Octils, anymore."

"There's always someone to blame, make no mistake," said Aries. "An entire Colony of radicals was just springed from that damn pipe. We'll blame leftists, they're always in the top three when it comes to taking the fall."

"Why not just tell the truth?" I renewed my grip on the hotshot. "I've already got a rapsheet as long as the Constitution."

"It doesn't do to make you seem too powerful," Aries had an answer at the ready. "Killing random Terrexians is one thing. The Secretary, and people will get ideas. *You'll* become embossed in history, not me. I'll just be one stupid leader with his back turned."

Aries didn't turn around.

My fingers were growing itchy, and hot. Ush was right, I *was* running a fever. It was time to wrap this up. Then, I wanted nothing more than to go to bed next to Ant. "Morrow, and

Medusa," my hand closed around the handle of the hotshot. "Your handlers know about it, now?"

"They knew before," he assured me. "That Crest character is so flashy."

"Knew about it, maybe," said Ant. "But, now, they know where it is."

Aries didn't shrug, so much as settled in his chair. The leather groaning against his weight. "You know where Earth is," he said. "Washington isn't going anywhere." The wheels whined as he shifted, again. He was fiddling with something. His sleeves? His suit? Maybe the cushion.

The mechanical whine was growing in pitch, though. This was more than rust on rust, I knew that sound well. This was–

"AHH!" The gun clattered to the table, and I clapped the hands over my hands. Yanked them down, folded them over, but that did little to stifle the sound

It was a high, stabbing whistle. One that didn't ring in my ears so much as thrust into them. Struck at my brain, burrowed in it, then took a big bite out of the meatiest lobe.

The gritted my teeth with such force, one of them snapped within my jaws, a molar, maybe.

The blood dribbled out past my lips.

"JEAN!" Ant took me into her arms, but dropped me just as quickly. My eyes fuzzed over, and my shoulders jerked. My arms going as loose as rope, flailing as if they were caught in a churning machine.

I squinted, but this did little to drown out the noise. When she picked up the hotshot, I wanted her to shoot me.

Aries turned in his seat when I opened my eyes, his smile pressed against a metal tube in his lip. Silver, polished, and emitting my new least favorite noise. A whistle.

One hand was splayed on the table as if he were still holding some document down. Keeping it pinned where he needed it. The other gripped a hotshot, aimed at me.

His finger flexed on the trigger as Ant squeezed her own.

A jet of red laser flung out of the barrel, and wrapped around Aries' face as he lowered the whistle, still grinning, turning his gun to the ceiling.

The Secretary's head melted into the leather.

Charred, smoking, gristley flesh spattered over the table in front of him. Green blood pulsing out of his open throat. A tongue–somehow, still pink–licking the air for several slow avins while a shuddering groan crawled across the table.

Flaming, gold tatters of his suit rained over Ant and me.

She set the gun on the table, and buried her face in my shoulder.

My fingers, still twitching, closed around her back.

My headache subsided as she cried, trading my red eyes for hers. My tears, for hers. My snot, for her snot. My blood for hers as she slammed a fist into her temple.

I stilled her hand, and she let me kiss the back of it.

I'm not sure how long it took, but we collected the guns, and the black folder, and began the long journey to the bottom of the staircase.

EPILOGUE

In the three octavers that followed, a lifetime seemed to past.

For one, Morrow gained a lot more new residents, and Medusa regained its old ones. That's right, we moved back into our docklodge. And, by the Griever, all five rooms were occupied. There was Ush, who resisted the urge to move her lab next to her bed. For once, separated the two.

Cad, who spent more time in Pool's room than not.

River, who spent more time in their room than anyone, and more time out of the lodge than not. It had been Pool's suggestion, a way for the three to get to know each other better, but there were the nesting grounds just past the barn in the tall grass. In the shade of a mass of dried, molded vines that stretched out over the land. Having taken root, but not thrived. An old experiment of Lynnie's.

There was Tendon, but he preferred to reside in the Kylix above. Still, Ush spent most nights with him. He was chattier than usual, and had taken to singing songs some of the children in the infirmary had taught him.

Then, of course, there was Ant and me.

I had to make her get out of bed, using much of the same proddings I'd used to get Cad on the treadmill. She needed the exercise, the faint light would be good for her, we had to stay strong.

We didn't know our neighbors well, but I didn't press this issue. After everything, it seemed we were only just getting to know *each other*, again. The last thing we wanted was strange company.

Captain Crest wanted to know everything, and so did I.

The CBI officers who'd been biding their time to emerge in Octil masks had been eliminated, she'd seen to that. Their faces, and the easers on their wrists, projected across the galaxy. This was a fight the maroons weren't afraid to take to the highest point of authority in Terrex. Or, one of them–There was IAPAC, which Janelle devoted herself to researching.

The doctors back in the Morrow infirmary had harvested the officer's organs, and put them to good use. For once, human parts were transplanted into Xenos.

The Xenogene village that cobbled together out of the survivors from the Intergalactic lab was another matter of tension.

SootFoot became a sort of liaison between them and the human residents. A leader rose to the surface, XG-Z 2156. They were scarcely an adult, only nineteen, but the oldest survivor. And already the parent of a toddler than clung to their bushy, white tail when they growled across tables at SootFoot and me.

Their assertions: That the xenos didn't need any help, least of all from humans, and especially not Terrans. Not they would survive fine on their own, with the gift of a domed greenhouse. That they didn't want to see hide nor hair of any maroons looking to bring everything down on them, when they'd only just broken free.

I never argued, but SootFoot did.

"Radicalization isn't something you can force on someone," I said to SootFoot, after a heated session. "It's something they either find, in time, or they don't."

"Well, if they don't find it, soon," said SootFoot. "They'll be a liability, not an asset."

"Isn't that what Morrow is for?" I asked. "For everyone that isn't ready to fight?"

This, they didn't answer, and I began to wonder what I'd actually roped my crew into.

As long as we stayed useful, though, we were safe. At least, I convinced myself of that.

Ush, Pool, and I reopened the brewery, and it was popular with the Vogiviq. No one had drokens to trade, but we had no use for it, now. It'd only been what Earth knew as a season, and we couldn't risk showing our faces even in Open Space.

Whenever we grew comfortable, whenever someone so much as mentioned a personal supply run, there were the Parasites. Swooping low into the atmosphere, but never close enough for us to make out the pilots. Just near enough for us to feel the hot jets from the thrusters. For our crops to wither in the black dust coughing out of the exhaust. For the children's cries to ring out from Morrow, and the elderly to ache in their joints.

They knew where we were, yes. And they weren't afraid to taunt us, but they *were* afraid to land. Still, this wouldn't stop a bombing. There was no reason they were only baying at our door, the dogs scratching and vanishing if it were opened. Yes, we were meant to live, but only in a state of fear.

Some of us did venture out, in shifts, to Pluto. Drip, sometimes Pond, Yilig on occasion. The protesters had taken up the majority of that mantle, though. And, as far as the official story went, we were ghosts in the narrative. Aries had been right about one thing, there was good reason to brush us off as simple criminals. Deserters ran, evaded. Maroons invaded, acted. Set fires, killed. Stoked fear in the hearts of Terrans. This was something only the Colonies were allowed to do.

On the topic of the official story, the radio under the fireplace in the main cabin–no, the *living room*–of our docklodge became an eighth resident. We never turned it off. The news trickled in quickly, at first. Then, the puff pieces clouded in around it, with time.

Aries was dead. A rogue protester that had already been killed was the culprit, but an investigation into the conspiracy to assassinate him was being carried out by the new Secretary of Terrex: Athena Adams.

Her voice was a lullaby through our receiver. "*The passing of my dear, loving, compassionate brother is a matter of great interest in the security sector*," she spoke during his televised funeral. An opportunity given for each Earth-bound citizen to kiss his hand, or cheek. Even lips, if they were so moved. Artemis had a closed casket, filled with live roses. Lowered into a plot right next to her father. "*We believe this lone actor is the same that took my sweet, innocent niece. Tonight, we say goodbye to the both of them*." Her voice broke, and there was a clamor in the crowd as someone rushed through to comfort her. "*I only ask two things of you all. The first is that you spare my poor nephew your questions. He's been through so much, and lost so much. A sister and a father, yes, but also a brother–His older brother remains missing, and is presumed captured. Many of you have speculated as to their fate,but make no mistake: We are on the trail of the criminals that have torn apart our family, and we will not rest until he is recovered.*"

A cheer erupted, and Antiope made for the power dial. I urged her to let the live feed go on. We needed every crumb of information they were willing to feed us. "*Settle down*," Athena quieted the crowd. "*The other thing I ask of you is that you remain vigilant. My brother's vision was of a united humanity, and we owe it to him to see this through. If you suspect anyone you know is working against his mission, I urge you to contact the Central Beureau of Inquiry through their tip-line. It is completely anonymous, and if you have nothing to hide, then there is nothing to fear. When my brother and I were born, Earth was ravaged by wild-fires, floods, hurricanes, drought, and a mass-extinction the likes of which hasn't been seen since the age of*

*dinosaurs. If we can survive that, we are made of something much hardier than anyone working against us knows possible."* Her final words were difficult to make out through the cheers going up from the crowd, but they were already well-known, blending into a chant that everyone on Earth, seemingly, took up at once. "*VINCERE SORTEM NOSTRAM! VINCERE SORTEM NOSTRAM! VINCERE SORTEM NOSTRAM!*"

Word came from the Colonies not just through the radio, though. On Medusa, there was mail. We weren't on any official route, but Crest had enough connections to keep parcels moving through Open Space. This connection would turn out to be Trilif, who had reformed and now went by Rariyik. She and her partner, Wave, weren't too thrilled to find out who was residing on Medusa, now, and were sure to include a bill with one number followed by a lot of zeroes for the damage to the Undergal, not to mention the hassle of disposing of so many bodies.

The first thing we received was a box of hormones. It came with a note from Wirro Key. "*I can see you've lost your minds, so I hope this helps. Visit when you can, we have a lot to talk about*." Under the vials of estrogen and testosterone, Wirro had included a single large bottle of BacteriClean.

The second was a letter from Fenton Hendrix. The fool had included his address. All the same, I was glad to hear from him. "*White guys fly under the radar well,*" he'd written. "*Ant, your sister was so angry she wanted nothing to do with me when the stun wore off. I thought she'd killed you all–she seemed capable of it–but now everyone's saying THIS is your doing. Is that true? Pool, I can't contact you, the Kaleidio is missing. I think someone at my party stole it. It was good seeing you, we should hang out more. Also, your voicemail is full, can I get a keg of the winter-melon Kolsch? Hold the pepper, if possible? In fact, you'd get a lot more orders if you*

*left it out, entirely. Much love, though the way that guy with the dreads looks at you, I doubt you'll need it."*

Another letter was unaddressed and without a name: "*Ant, Aunt Athena says radicals from Pluto killed Dad, but I know it was that Xeno. You told me, once, about your relationship with that control-freak back in Colony College. I can't bear to watch you being controlled, again. Not after everything you warned me about. This monster had destroyed our family, why can't you see that if it kills one Adams, it'll kill another? If it births your child, all children are innocent, but you should smother the baby. It's a peaceful way to go, and it'll find its way to Dad. He'll take care of it, like how he took care of us. You can't afford any ties to that animal, it'll only bring you further under its control. Even through everything, I love you, and I know you love me. I can feel it. The same way I can feel this has something to do with that thing, XG-J. Please write me back, with Dad gone, I feel so alone. They've asked to start bleeding me, and I'll do everything in my power for my Terrex, for America. I know you would, too. We need you. You have a greater purpose than on that moon, and the last thing I want is for you to get caught in the crossfire between us and those animals. Your brother, Apollo.*"

Ant slept with Apollo's letter under her pillow. It was there, even, when we were intimate, again. Under her head, but in her head, too. In her eyes. Her bright, black eyes that had dimmed since Aries' death had bloomed a new star. And I knew she wrote him, back, but she didn't say anything to me about it. She didn't talk about the pregnancy, either. Of this, I was thankful.

I didn't want to talk about it even as Ush kept me in the lab for extra fluids, to monitor my vitals, when we returned from Mars. Antiope just held me, slept next to me. Spoonfed me tomato soup that warmed me deeper than she could ever know. Through my soul, to something

only she could touch. Something hot, and bright, with rays that shot out so I wondered how she could hold me without burning.

It turned out, I was anemic, and had to go on iron supplements.

The bleeding stopped, and the burgundy brigand known as my menstrual cycle returned. Probably the only time I was happy to greet it.

The hot coal in my spine simmered with regular, mild exercise. Per the Doctor's orders, I couldn't hit the treadmill until further notice. "You've pushed yourself hard enough," Ush said. "Take a break, Captain." I settled for walks, sitting still had never been my strong suit.

There was a library in our little town, and I frequented it as often as Pool frequented the nesting grounds. They didn't have to tell us that they were pregnant, it showed very quickly. But something was growing in me, too. A strange sort of thing that I savored because I knew it was fleeting. *Peace*.

The works of Tamora Pierce, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Octavia Butler appealed to me. They were a bit idealistic, but it was fascinating to read what humans perceived their future to look like. Their fantasies were of particular interest. Knights in shining armor, with flashing swords, and talking cats. Even in these worlds, birth control was easier to come by. Humans could be so unrealistic, for people so down to Earth.

Crest was as fired up as ever, and she wanted our first mission since the incident on Mars to be commandeering a ship Janelle suspected was transporting arms. Guns, stunStones, the works. This would wait, though. We could never be sure when the heat was off of us, if it would ever subside, but the hard deadline was the hatching.

And that would have to wait until the laying.

Pool's nest didn't look suitable for labor, not to mention, eventually, children. Scraps of metal plating and winding iron bars curled into a circle in the center of a crater River had hollowed out. Under a blanket of copper stars dappling the stretch of space above.

Pool's brood would be in good company. Other nests, though sparse, were present cometons apart from each other. Each unique and intricate, bent metal plating shielding the center of the nest as a flower's petals does the bud of the plant. A layered, gorgeous sculpture serving as curtain for Pool to lay their eggs in private. Though, they chose not to.

"Are you sure?" I glanced between them, River, and Cad. "I mean–Humans usually only allow parents during active birth."

"Humans labor for hours at a time," Pool replied breezily. They had a point. Humanity rejoiced at the creation of the indivitro pods, those nutrient-rich artificial wombs Antiope and I had originated in. But Ush and Cad had come about breathing the old-fashioned way, uterus-bearing parents straining and screaming, bleeding and beating back their own deaths to urge sizable infants out of their most sensitive canal.

One would think after nine octavers, they were owed an easy delivery, but birthing carried inherent risk for humans. So much going into it: Dilation, hip-width, umbilical cords that could betray their purpose to strangle the infant or hinder its arrival.

After three octavers, Pool, Cad, and River's genes had calcified in the vykaleidizen's body. After just a dozen or so deep breaths, Pool clasping Ush's hand as the Doctor offered encouraging words, the eggs practically slid out of Pool's body.

There was something strangely dignified about the entire affair. Humans, when naked, were silly, fleshy, and floppy. Everything about Kaleidizens was so put-together. Especially after their heat, Pool's foliage fell around their body like an elegant garment. When they shed their

suit, there was no lost elegance, no gained awkwardness. When the eggs arrived, there was no ichor. Just slime coating, the same color and viscosity as their venom.

The center of the crater was warmer than the rim, a bed of metal shavings cushioning each wet, head-sized egg as it loosed from Pool's body. River reacted as if driven by instinct, eyes glowing gold, curling that foot long, forked blue tongue around each egg to clean it with no hesitation whatsoever regarding its origin. I understood this as tradition without having to ask.

We watched as the shard-papered, wet eggs were cleaned, one by one, by the jynkaleid. Each the same size, but all–as revealed by River's efforts–scaled over a different pattern and color. One, a brilliant blue. Hundreds–thousands–of glowing scales covering every surface of the egg. Another, as bronzed as Pool themself, but brighter, a rich color that rivaled those of the nearby stars. A third was a murky greenish tint, teal scales protecting the egg.

Cad watched in reverence as each was delivered. Ush had suggested they give Pool room to breathe and relax, and he didn't protest. Spectating from the edge of the crater while River sat inside it. Only speaking when Pool gave a great sigh and stepped into their spacesuit. Zipped it, and leaned against Ush and Antiope. "May I?"

"They're yours, aren't they?" Pool huffed. Ant offered them a sip of water, and they gulped from the glass canister so greedily, they bit into the bottle as well.

Cad's fingers trembled as he reached inside. "Yeah," he breathed. "I guess they are." His tone was indiscernable, and I knew the cause of the trepidation. That sticky word 'they.' There was no way to tell if, when River gingerly handed him the blue egg, for instance, the egg was, indeed, his. The one he and Pool had made, or one of the three River and Pool had contributed their genes to.

Cadbury cradled it all the same, weighed it in his palms. Hugged it close to his heart as tears spilled onto it. “It’s so warm,” he marvelled. “Do–Do they ever, you know? *Not* hatch.”

“It happens,” River admitted. “It’s rare, but it’s a phenomena that occurs often enough for there to be a term for it: *Sophuca*. ‘Stone eggs.’”

Nelson chewed on this information thoughtfully. Gently nestling the blue egg in with the others. Each one touching, glowing. “An octaver to hatch,” he mused.

“If I do my job correctly,” River noted. And didn’t make an effort to mask their own nervousness. Sprinkling more shavings around the clutch. They sat closer to the eggs, let their hands hover over them as if to gauge the warmth. “I will not discriminate, Cadbury.”

“I know,” said Cad, quickly. His tone sure, the truth. “I was just thinking…Well, how does the naming work?”

This, Pool answered. Kneeling to nuzzle the eggs. Scales singing against the surface of the glittering clutch. “The layer donates their ancestral designation,” they said. “Our Kaleidizen ancestors emerged in much the way humans did, though not from seas of water, but molten glass. *Magmard*.”

River nodded, “Each of us descends from a line that crawled to the surface via a particular mode of *Magmard*. The molten sea varied from the landscape of our ancestral home–Back in the Andromeda, millions of yushes ago.”

“But you only have the one name,” Cad said. “I don’t understand.”

“You do,” said Pool. “My layer was descended from ancient Kaleids that heaved themselves out of an encircled *magmard*. Their name was Pool–*Prelusar*–Their clutch was called ‘Pool.’ Their clutch’s clutch was called ‘Pool.’ Their clutch’s clutch’s clutch was called ‘Pool.’” Pool touched each egg, one by one, pointedly. “My clutch will be called ‘Pool.’”

"But–" Cad balked. "I don't–*All three of them*?"

"They will gain middle names," River said. "Two of them. One chosen in their childhood, one chosen in their adolescence."

"Isn't that a little dehumanizing?" Cad prodded. "I mean, humans usually choose different names for each sibling, for each child."

"Humans have been calling themselves 'junior,' 'senior,' and 'the third' for centuries," Pool's tone was steeled. Absolute. "You forget yourself, Nelson. My brood is half-human, but none of them are *human*. Am I understood?"

But Cad wasn't done. "I just mean–" He took Pool's hand, mulled whatever was coming next over for a few long axons. "I don't like to talk much about it, but before my name was Nelson, I was named after my grandmother. I understand traditions, don't get me wrong, Pool. But choice and individual identity are important human customs, and I care about them as much as you care about your own culture's."

"The difference being–" Pool pulled their hand free. "Human customs thrive while mine struggles to carry on. I get where you're coming from, Cad, but two chosen middle names is enough."

"Neither of you go by your middle name," Cad pointed out.

"Because we prefer to adhere to our traditions," Pool said. "When the eggs hatch, the vy, jyn, and vyjynkaleids will *decide* for themselves, just as I did. Just because your own culture was stifling, growing up, doesn't mean some people don't find comfort in traditions. In upholding our history."

Cad opened his mouth, but only gulped the air in his helmet. His brow softened. "Okay," he relented. "I'm sorry, you're right."

"I know I am," Pool kissed the First Mate. "But that doesn't mean I want you to stop disagreeing with me."

For a long time, we lingered around the nest. Took turns feeling the eggs. "It's good for them to be touched," River said. "We call it 'rousing.' They thrive under attention." So we roused them, one by one. Each egg as warm and stormy to the fingertips as the Blunder in the bottle.

"It's nice to meet you, Pool, Pool, and Pool," I said to the clutch. "Maybe we'll meet again. When those scales are attached to your skin instead of your shell."

"To think," Cad murmured against an egg, this one the green one. "Me, a father." His tears spilled into the nest. "What will they call you, River?"

"They will call me 'River,'" chuckled the jynkaleid. "I'll leave the parenting to you, Cadbury, if you leave the early rearing to me. There's much to impart to a youngling Kaleidizen. Our history, our art, our *stories*. A nest-guardian is more teacher-protecter than, what is that word you humans use for parents? *Daddy*?"

Antiope winced at the mention of the term. Right. For the warmth of the moment, there was the cold task we'd carried out. The slaying of her father.

Cad drew his sleeve across his eyes, but this did nothing to stop the flow of tears. "I've always wanted a family," he said. "River, there's no one else I'd rather start one with than you and Pool. *Stijikion frenarien urlecia*."

River blinked back their surprise. "You've been picking up some *Kaleidizen*," they beamed. "Not bad pronunciation, either."

"It'll be even better when they hatch," Cad assured them, swiping at his eyes, again. His gaze swept past the nest, and River, to an expanse between nests. "Brook?"

And so it was, standing with trembling hands, and a gaunt face. He looked like shit, but it was him. Dead brambles cling to his filthy spacesuit, which hung off of him as if it were three sizes too big. He hadn't been around to any of the meals in the dining hall, even SootFoot had given up chasing him around the moon. You can't find someone who doesn't want to be found. "Hi," he said. "I just–The nesting grounds is the only place where I feel–"

Nelson opened his arms, and Brook stumbled into them. "We miss you, kid," Cad said. "I hope you know your mom would want you to live, and *eat*."

Brook didn't say anything, let Cad smother him in his big shoulder.

"What do you think of that?" Pool muttered to Ush.

"Things like this have a way of bringing people together," said the Doctor. "I'll have to take a look at him. Kid looks half-dead."

"Only half?" Ant said.

This, we shared a dark kind of chuckle at.

Pool's laughter caught in their throat, though, and the Translations Officer doubled over. Their iron arm clutched around their torso. "*AUGHH!*" Pool bared their fangs, as if to ward off an invisible enemy.

"Pool!" Cad knelt. River stepped around the nest to take their hand, eyes glowing. Two extra ones opening in their forehead, seeing into their mate's mind.

"They're in pain," said River.

"No shit," I said.

"Could it be sepsis?" said Ant.

"Kaleidizen blood doesn't work the way ours does," Ush produced their stethoscope. "Pool, unzip your suit."

Pool couldn't manage to, so Cad did it for them.

Ush pressed the listening device to Pool's chest, but lowered it to their stomach. It had deflated significantly, but was still distended. As if an air bubble had been caught inside them. I expected Ush to lean on it, or explain that this was some abscess that needed draining in a clinical environment. "Take off your suit, your boots, too."

"What?" Pool kicked their boots off, though. Cad held their arms as I helped them out of their suit. There was ichor in it, golden and thick, with syrupy, red tendrils that grew thicker with each passing moment. "What's happening?"

"You're not done," Ush pocketed their stethoscope, and pulled out a pair of latex gloves. "Pool, I know you're scared, but I need you to push."

"*What?*" Pool's head was rested on Cad's lap, and they twisted around to look at him.

"I think you're in labor," said Cad. "Pool, my love, you have to push it out."

"No," Pool shook their head, and more bright blood sprayed out of them. They cried out, clawwing at their stomach til scales came off in their hand. "I can't!"

"You can," said Ush. "You're strong, Pool. I know you can."

"It doesn't make any…" Pool trailed off, and their eyes rolled back. "*STOP!*"

"I've heard of this," Brook uttered, shielding their face when we glared at him. "My mom, she knew someone who knew someone," he clarified. "I was hatched from an egg, but not everyone is. She thinks–*thought*–that the body forgot to form one, sometimes." He studied our faces. "She didn't tell you?"

"We didn't get to talk much," I said. "She was complicated company."

Pool's eyes erupted in gold, but flickered. "I can't…"

River knelt, now, too. At their side, squeezing their hand. “I’m here,” they said, their own eyes glowing. River panted as Pool’s eyes flickered, again. “Give your pain to me, and push.”

So Pool did.

River cried, now. With such intensity, the metal shavings in the nest stirred, and the eggs glowed brighter. Every egg did, even those in the nests in other craters.

First came the head, dusted in small, black curls. Wet, and pasted to the scalp.

Four eyes, shut tight to the world. One mouth open, and bellowing.

There were flaps of flesh, a translucent, yellow membrane, clinging to the infant, and Ush peeled it back to free its chest.

The neck was draped in scales, gold, violet, blue, and deep pink. Like a collar.

The body was scaled sparely, mostly in the belly, trailing down to the legs.

A tiny dewlap was embedded in the throat, as lavender as our spacesuits.

The feet seemed all too tiny, the flailing fists, too.

A gnarled, glistening, yellow rope was attached to its navel. Ush produced a pair of scissors to snip it. She held the baby for just an instant, passing it off to me to usher out the afterbirth. Reaching *inside* of Pool to achieve this, “It’s almost over.”

A purple sack emerged from Pool, seeping blood and ichor.

The Translations Officer heaved once more, but blood only trickled out of them, now. Now, all was still, except the infant. The newborn.

It was so small, it would’ve been easy to forget in my arms, if it wasn’t beating my chest. Smearing blood on my helmet. Leaving one pink handprint that I hesitated to wipe off.

Pool sobbed into Cadbury’s lap, and he stroked their scales, but fixed his eyes on the infant.

Ush handed me a cloth napkin, and I swiped it over the baby's face. Their eyes clear, now, it looked at me. Two of the eyes were deep brown, almost black. The other two, on top, were yellow, and glowed.

The remnants of the umbicilical cord were drying fast, frosting over, brown, and hanging off limply while the infant thrashed, and cried, and shat in my hands. The shit was tar-like, and deep green. Running between my fingers. But it seemed to settle the infant's stomach, as they only cooed, now.

Ant took it from me so I could clean my gloves.

"We need to do an APGAR test," said Ush. "Appearance is good, they seem to be a healthy color. Grimace, Activity, and Respiration seem good–That was a solid cry, the lungs seem to be working well. For for Pulse–" They pulled out their stethoscope again, but Ant didn't give the infant to them. Handing it to Cadbury, instead.

Pool, River, and Cad inspected the baby. River reaching out to take one tiny foot into their hand, and squeeze it. The baby cried again, once, sharply.

When Pool reached out with their iron arm, the child recoiled. "How can this happen?" They struggled to sit up, but Cad urged them down.

Pool ignored him, slipping on their suit, then their boots.

"They're ours," said Nelson. "That's all that matters."

"That *thing* is not a Kaleidizen!" Pool hugged themself. Ush put an arm around them, but they brushed it off. "I was supposed to have a traditional laying."

"I think we've proven things rarely go to plan for us," said River, rising to speak to Pool. "There are the stories–"

"Those are just myths," Pool winced.

"You should rest," said Ush.

"I wouldn't need to if–" Pool bared their fangs at the infant, venom pooling around their tongue. "If that thing hadn't–"

"That *thing*," Cadbury stood, but cradled the infant gingerly. "Is our child, Pool." He smiled down at the baby, offered it a finger to wrap its fist around. "I know this isn't what you wanted, but we can't unmake them."

"No," Pool said. "This isn't what I wanted, this is what *you* wanted!"

Cad staggered backward, and Brook righted him. "I wouldn't wish this on you," he said. "I wouldn't wish birth on anyone!"

"It was a mistake to mate with you!" Pool spat, globs of venom splashing onto the First Mate's helmet. The infant played in it, smearing it over his vision. "I deviated too far from my culture, and I've been punished for that."

"Is that what you think of me?" Nelson's voice was small, he sounded like a child, himself. "Is that what you think of Kemi? A deviation?"

Pool lunged at him, stopping just short of shoving him onto his ass. "Don't you mention her!" Growling, scales flared and vibrating with rage. "Don't you *ever* mention her!" Their eyes flicked down to the infant, which reached for them. Pool slapped one hand away, and it howled. "This is your responsibility, Cad. River will be occupied with the nest, and I–I can't trouble myself with a baby."

"You won't have to," Nelson's tone was soft, despite everything. "I know you're upset, but I love you, and I love River, and I love our child." He cradled the infant close to his chest, his hand playing in the hair that had dried, sprouting frost. "Should I call them Pool?"

"No," said Pool, gentle this time. Having burned through their hate. "Don't dishonor me."

"I won't," said Cad. "I'll try not to," he looked down at the baby. It stirred, yawning. "I'll name them Eagre, you always liked to tell us those stories, and you were always so *alive* when you did. Eagre Pool River Cadbury."

The baby drifted into a sleep so deep it would've been troubling if not for the soft exhale, the strong rise and fall of its tiny chest.

"Eagre," said Pool. "That seems right."

"They were certainly *eager* to make an appearance," said Ush. "*Yeesh*."

"It's a fitting name," River assured Cad, one hand on his shoulder. They shared a kiss that Pool pretended not to see, using their boots to scuff out a small crater next to their nest. This one populated by stones.

"Well, what do you think, Captain?" said Ant.

My brain was untethered. What the fuck would we tell Crest? How would this impact the coming mission? Great Griever, how would this impact *my sleep*? Infants didn't only wail in convenient aurons. Yet, there was no one to blame, so my worry dissipated. Existence wasn't anything anyone should apologize for. The universe would be bad enough to anyone that wasn't a Terran, that wasn't White and Earth-born and wealthy and powerful. The least I could do was make this little home of ours hospitable, a place for it to grow, and learn, and play. While this peace lasted, it would be a lasting peace.

Still, a good can of Kolsch wouldn't hurt me. "I think I'm gonna lay off the alcohol."

*Narrative harvested on the Eleventh Drain, of the Eleventh Octaver*

*Twelve O'Auron, Nineteen Avins, Three Axons*

*Translation complete and accurate, to the best of our knowledge.*

*Further harvesting requested.*

*Status: PENDING*

*Stenographer: Fejoqell Luzinur*

THE END